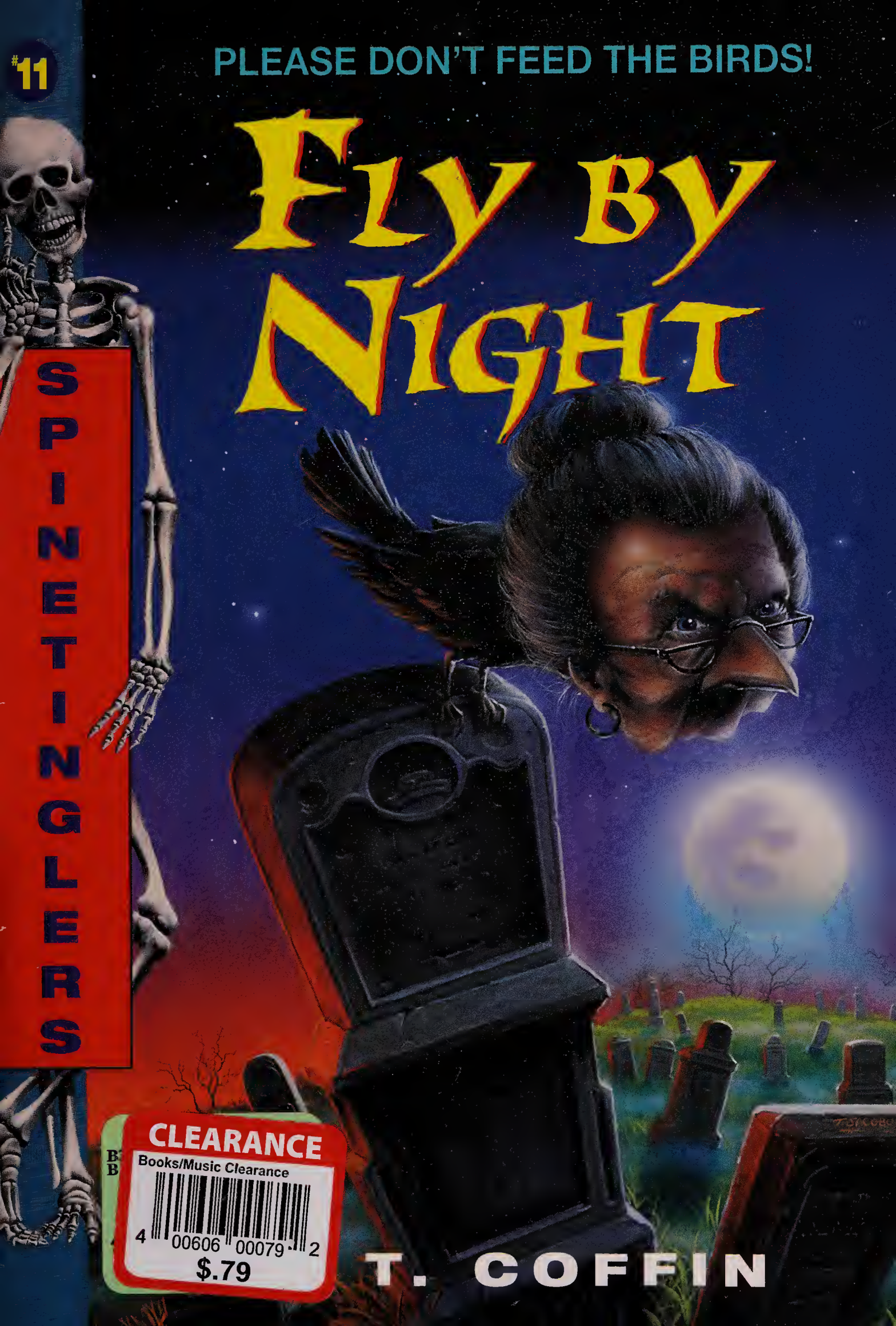
#11

PLEASE DON'T FEED THE BIRDS!

Fly by Night



SPINETINGLERS

CLEARANCE
Books/Music Clearance
4 00606 00079 2
$.79

T. COFFIN

AVON CAMELOT

U.S.$3.50
CAN.$4.50

EAN

9 780380 783663

ISBN 0-380-78366-5

50350

Fly by Night

Other Avon Camelot Books in the
SPINETINGLER *Series*
by M. T. Coffin

(#1) The Substitute Creature
(#2) Billy Baker's Dog Won't Stay Buried
(#3) My Teacher's a Bug
(#4) Where Have All the Parents Gone?
(#5) Check It Out—and Die!
(#6) Simon Says, "Croak!"
(#7) Snow Day
(#8) Don't Go to the Principal's Office
(#9) Step On a Crack
(#10) The Dead Kid Did It

Coming Soon

(#12) Killer Computer

Avon Books are available at special quantity discounts for bulk purchases for sales promotions, premiums, fund raising or educational use. Special books, or book excerpts, can also be created to fit specific needs.

For details write or telephone the office of the Director of Special Markets, Avon Books, Dept. FP, 1350 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10019, 1-800-238-0658.

SPINETINGLERS

#11

Fly by Night

M. T. COFFIN

AN AVON CAMELOT BOOK

If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this "stripped book."

FLY BY NIGHT is an original publication of Avon Books. This work has never before appeared in book form.

AVON BOOKS
A division of
The Hearst Corporation
1350 Avenue of the Americas
New York, New York 10019

Copyright © 1996 by Kathleen Duey
Excerpt from *Killer Computer* copyright © 1996 by Robert Hirschfeld
Published by arrangement with the author
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 95-96111
ISBN: 0-380-78366-5
RL: 4.9

All rights reserved, which includes the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever except as provided by the U.S. Copyright Law. For information address Avon Books.

First Avon Camelot Printing: July 1996

CAMELOT TRADEMARK REG. U.S. PAT. OFF. AND IN OTHER COUNTRIES, MARCA REGISTRADA, HECHO EN U.S.A.

Printed in the U.S.A.

OPM 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Fly by Night

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2018 with funding from
Kahle/Austin Foundation

https://archive.org/details/flybynight0000coff

There was a big crow perched on the fence as Ty went past on his bike. There were a lot of them in Pleasant Hills, all huge, blue-black and noisy. When he came to the little intersection, Ty hesitated, then turned, pedaling off the pavement and onto the dirt road. He smiled. There were woods and fields to explore. His new room had a little balcony where he could set up his telescope. Pleasant Hills was going to be perfect.

The dirt road led Ty eastward toward the woods. An old-fashioned fence ran along one side. It was black wrought iron spikes; each one was tipped with a decorative little arrow-shape. Here and there, rose bushes were wrapped around the fence, pink and red blooms drooping to hide the thorny stems.

Ty pedaled harder, standing up when the road

got steeper, until he got to the top of the first hill. Then he coasted the whole way down. He wanted to keep riding forever. It was a good day to explore, but he knew that if he was gone too long his mother would be upset. She expected him to help unpack.

Suddenly, a crow flew low across the road right in front of Ty. He braked and zig-zagged, frowning as the bike's rear tire skidded a little. Crazy bird. It had almost hit him. It flew on, skimming the top of the weathered iron fence. Ty stopped and put his foot down, watching it. In the middle of the field it landed on a tree stump or something, flapping its wings for balance.

Ty shook his head and started to pedal off. Then the crow's cawing attracted his attention again and he looked back at it. It hadn't landed on a tree stump. Its perch was white, rectangular, stuck into the ground. Ty caught his breath. A headstone? But this was a field, not a graveyard. Or was it? He could see a second light gray stone among the trees now, and a third, polished black. Curious, he leaned his bike against the fence and stood, squinting in the afternoon sun.

No one had said anything about a graveyard being this close to the Pleasant Hills subdivision. He was sure his mother didn't know. But then,

it wasn't really a graveyard. He could only see three graves, half hidden by trees.

The crow, which had been sitting still, suddenly spread its wings and took off, its cry echoing across the valley. Ty watched the black wings beating strongly. It rose, then veered east. Ty turned to follow its flight. As it got smaller with distance, he lowered his eyes, scanning the tree-lined horizon.

There was a big old house up ahead, along the edge of the woods. It looked like something out of an old movie. The roof was steep and it looked like it had spires or towers. Ty wished he had brought his spotting scope, but it wasn't unpacked yet. His mother had insisted; furniture and kitchen stuff came first.

Ty looked back along the road, then slowly turned his bike around. His mother had said he could take a half hour break. His time was probably about up. He got on and pedaled back up the little dirt road, glad it was summer. He'd have time to explore, time to spend nights gazing through his telescope on the little balcony off his room.

Ty topped the first hill and started down, leaning forward to get more speed, then standing to pedal up the second hill. He turned back onto

pavement at the bottom, following the curving street past the rows of new homes. Most of the driveways had bikes or tricycles, and kids were playing baseball in one front yard. Ty sighed. He knew most boys his age would be glad that there were so many other kids in the neighborhood. His mother would start asking him whether he had met any new friends soon.

Ty sat up straight on his bike, letting the wind wash over his face. He would make a few friends eventually, but it wasn't nearly as important to him as it was to his mother. His favorite thing to do was to set up his telescope and spend hours by himself exploring the stars. He liked the incredible distances, the feeling that he was crossing a vast, mysterious place. He liked to think about the millions of years it took the light from the stars to travel across space and fall into his telescope. And he liked being alone.

Ty smiled, pedaling hard and enjoying the wind. Pleasant Hills was going to be a great place for star gazing. The balcony off his room had enough room for his telescope and a chair. There were no street lights except near the entrance to the subdivision and those were low pressure sodium. They wouldn't interfere at all. Pleasant Hills really was perfect.

Ty turned right on Madison Street. Most of the streets had presidents' names. He stood up to pedal up the last hill, guiding the bike toward the first driveway on the left side of the street. As he slowed, he looked at their new two-story house. It was painted light gray and the windows had darker gray shutters.

The moving van Ty's mother had rented was still backed up to the garage door. His older sister Shari was standing out on the lawn, talking to a group of girls from the neighborhood who had come to check them out.

Shari waved and Ty pretended not to see her as he slanted into the turn. He did not want to be introduced to a bunch of girls. Ty coasted to a stop and sat astride the bike inside the garage for a second.

It felt odd to be moving into a new house. They had lived in their last house almost ten years. That was all but one year of his whole life. He couldn't remember the house they had lived in before that. Shari could, a little, but then she was thirteen now, two years older than he was.

Ty's mother was a nurse. She had gotten a transfer from one hospital to another. That was why they had moved. But she said it was the best thing that had ever happened to them, that

they were going to love it here. Ty was beginning to think that she was right.

"Ty?" His mother's voice came out of the house.

He smiled and shook his head. His mother's radar was working. "I'm home!" he called out.

She appeared at the door which led from the kitchen into the garage. Her curly hair was even less organized than usual. She grinned. "I'm glad you're back. And just when I needed you."

Ty groaned. "You always need me."

His mother laughed. "Not true, Tyson Delaware Considine. A majority of the time I have little use for you." Her eyes were sparkling. She loved to tease him. "Just now, however," she gestured into the house, "I am trying to move the couch and then there are boxes to carry."

Ty got off the bike and followed her into the house, pulling off his helmet. The place still smelled like fresh paint. Everything was clean and new looking. His mother looked as if she was about to burst out singing. He grinned, watching her dart around the kitchen, opening and closing cabinets.

His mother had been excited about buying this house for a year. She had always wanted to live in a brand new home of their very own. The day the bank had granted her the house loan she had

gotten Shari and him out of school early. They had gone to eat pizza and hot fudge sundaes to celebrate.

"The couch is in here," his mother called from the living room. Ty followed her in. They half-carried and half-dragged the couch across the room and set it at an angle facing the fireplace. Ty's mother straightened up, her hands on her hips. "That's better. I love that fireplace."

Ty smiled at her. "You've said that about a hundred times."

She frowned. "Well. I do. I love it." She turned and seemed to focus on Ty for the first time. "Why don't you go out and meet a few of the kids with Shari?"

Ty heard the concern in her voice. She always wanted him to have more friends.

"I thought you wanted me to carry more boxes in," Ty reminded her.

She sighed. Then she smiled. "Okay. If you'd rather work than goof off I won't stop you. Bring in anything with a green label on it."

Ty nodded and went back through the kitchen, out into the garage. He walked up the loading ramp into the rented moving van and stood for a moment, letting his eyes get used to the dimmer light. His mother had color-coded the labels. Green

was kitchen things. Red was his stuff. Blue was Shari's. Yellow labels meant sheets and towels.

Ty stacked two kitchen boxes, then picked them up. He walked down the ramp slowly. Pots and pans were heavy.

"Hey! Ty!"

It was Shari, waving goodbye to the troupe of girls who peered into the garage, smiling. One of them had brown hair which fell nearly to her waist. As the girls turned to leave, Shari followed Ty's glance.

"That's Tina Klaus," she said once the girls had walked back to the sidewalk. "She lives there." Shari pointed at the house across the street.

Ty shifted the boxes. "These are getting heavy, Shari."

She looked at the labels. "Kitchen stuff?"

Ty nodded. "I saw a few more in there."

Shari walked around him and disappeared into the back of the van. Ty went down the ramp and into the house. His mother was on her knees in the kitchen, peering into a low cabinet. "Shari's bringing some too," he told her as he set the boxes down on the kitchen counter.

She straightened, looking up at him. "Wonderful. It looked like she was getting to know the neighborhood last time I went out to the van."

Ty shrugged. Shari made friends easily. Almost everyone liked her from the moment they met her. And she liked almost everyone just as quickly. Ty was very different; he didn't make friends easily.

Shari came in carrying a huge box that clanked when she set it down. "There are some really nice girls on this block," she announced.

Ty watched his mother smile. "Good news," she said. "I hope you both like it here."

Ty nodded when she caught his eye. "I'm going to love it. It's perfect."

His mother sighed. "You mean the low-sodium lights?"

Ty nodded again. "Star gazing will be perfect here."

"I want you to make friends too, Ty."

The sudden loud squawking of a crow startled them all. Ty whirled around, facing the door which led into the garage. The huge black bird had landed on the kitchen counter, its head tipped to one side, staring at them. It hopped forward, wings half-lifted, its claws clicking against the tile. As Ty watched, it spread its wings again and flew back outside, its raucous cry echoing as it passed through the garage, then fading.

Ty turned back around and looked at his mother. His heart was thudding against his ribs, which made him feel silly. It was just a crow, after all.

"I've never seen a wild bird do anything like that in my life," his mother said, shaking her head.

Shari nodded. "It was weird, like he was checking us out or something."

Ty stared at the door. Shari was right. That was exactly what it had felt like. But that was impossible. A bird wasn't that smart. Ty started back out toward the moving van. In a little while, the uneasiness had passed and he stopped thinking about the crow.

The next morning Ty woke early, and for a few seconds, he wasn't sure where he was. Then he sank back into his pillow, looking around his new room. Half his junk was still packed. The boxes were lined up against one wall. He would have to spend some time soon getting his room fixed up. Ty smiled. He really did like this house. His room was on the second floor; the sliding glass door that led onto his little balcony faced east and a smaller window faced north. The morning sun was streaming in, making bright rectangles on the new tan carpet. Ty yawned and sat up, then stood and walked to the sliding glass door.

One of the best things about the house was the fact that it was so close to the open fields across the street. There were oak trees along the back-

yard fence, swaying a little in the morning breeze. Ty stared at them, and blinked.

Huge glossy crows sat high above the ground, moving back and forth slightly as the breeze stirred the branches. Ty opened the sliding door. The crows didn't move. They made no sound at all. As Ty watched, one of the huge birds took off and flew in a graceful arc, circling the back lawn once, then a second time. Then, abruptly, it flew toward him, curling its wing tips and flaring its tail at the last second to veer off. Its dark, shiny eyes seemed to meet his own.

Ty stared, barely breathing, as the big black bird rejoined the flock in the trees. A few seconds later all the crows rose, beating their wings hard, climbing upward to fly over the house. Ty realized he was holding his breath and exhaled. There was something about the crows that made him feel strange. They seemed odd. They didn't seem afraid of people like most wild birds.

Ty shrugged off his uneasiness. He liked the new house and he couldn't wait to set up his telescope. He stretched and yawned again, then turned away from the window.

His mother knocked on his door, softly. "Ty? Are you up?"

"Sort of," he answered her though the door.

"Oh good." Her voice sounded so delighted that Ty could imagine the sudden grin on her face. His mother loved to celebrate things and their first day in the new house wasn't the kind of occasion she could let slip past.

"I thought we should celebrate," she announced through the door.

Ty smiled. "I'll be down in five minutes," he told her.

"French toast," she said, and he could hear her footsteps going on down the hall. "I love this house," she added after a few steps. Ty heard her knock lightly on Shari's door. Shari was usually grumpy in the mornings, but the idea of a big breakfast would help cheer her up.

Ty walked to his closet and looked in. A few minutes later he was dressed, his T-shirt and jeans clean but a little wrinkled. Everything had been packed, scrunched in the boxes. It'd be a week or two before he had washed the wrinkles out of all his clothes. He didn't care, but he knew that his mother wouldn't like it. He tried to smooth the front of his T-shirt as he went out his door and down the hall.

Ty passed Shari's room. He could hear her banging around inside. Maybe it was going to

take more than the promise of French toast to get her past her morning grumpies.

Ty's mother was singing in the kitchen when he reached the bottom of the stairs. He crossed the living room and went in. She already had the skillet heating and the bread cut into diagonal slices.

"Morning," Ty said as she looked up. "I'd like to ride my bike out on that country road again today." She didn't answer, but she smiled. Ty opened the refrigerator. It was almost empty. They hadn't really gone shopping yet. He pulled out the orange juice. It took him three tries to remember which cupboard the glasses were in.

"Good morning," Shari mumbled, coming in the door. Ty knew better than to answer her. She really didn't want anyone to talk to her yet.

Ty's mother whistled softly as she cooked. The new kitchen began to fill with the scent of cinnamon and melting butter. Ty walked to the sink and looked out the kitchen window.

The girl across the street was out in her driveway, throwing a ball for a big golden retriever. The dog bounded up and down the sloping lawn, chasing the ball. The girl's long hair fanned out when she spun around to throw.

"That's Tina," Shari said from behind him. He nodded.

"French toast. Come and get it!" Ty's mother sang out. Shari led the way to the breakfast table. Ty smiled. His mother had put the glasses of milk in the freezer for a few minutes, a favorite trick of hers. The almost-ice milk was delicious. Ty ate fast. He knew what he wanted to do today, if his mother would let him.

Once he was finished eating he thanked her for the great breakfast. Then he said quickly, "I want to ride around this morning, if it's okay."

His mother smiled. "I think I can finish up the kitchen alone. You need to finish unpacking your own boxes, though."

Ty pushed back his chair. "I can do that this afternoon." He stood up, still looking at his mother.

She nodded. "All right then. Wear your helmet. Be back by noon?"

"Sure." Ty carried his plate to the sink and rinsed it quickly.

"I'm going to go see Tina," Shari announced. Ty looked at her. Once she had eaten breakfast and had time to wake up, she was a normal older sister.

"You have boxes to unpack, too," Ty's mother reminded her.

Shari yawned. "You aren't making Ty start yet."

Ty headed for the door before Shari could start an argument. He ducked into the garage and got his bike. He put on his helmet and pushed the big overhead door open, then glided down the driveway into the morning sun.

Ty followed the curving street back to the dusty little intersection where it crossed the dirt road. Instead of following the pavement, he turned onto the little dirt road as he had done the day before. He pedaled steadily until he got to the place where the old iron fence began. Then he slowed down a little, resting. He pedaled harder as the hill steepened, then coasted down and braked.

The morning light made it easier to see the headstones back among the trees. There were at least three. Farther down the road there was a house. It was almost completely hidden by arching trees and thick bushes. How old was the house? Maybe these were pioneer graves, people who had died a long time ago. A lot of early American families had had their own graveyards—or at least Ty had read about family graveyards in books.

Ty looked up the road. It looked like it curved up ahead. He got on his bike and started pedaling. Once he had gotten to the top of the next

rise, it was obvious that the dirt road went all the way to the old house. Ty rode along slowly, looking at the iron fence on one side of the road, and the open fields on the other.

As he got closer to the house, Ty pedaled a little harder. He didn't want whoever lived there to see him. He didn't think he was trespassing, but maybe he was. He couldn't see the road beyond the house. Maybe the whole thing was a long, unpaved driveway. Ty rounded the last curve and caught his breath.

The house was huge. It was made out of some kind of dark stone. There were long narrow windows and a winding cobblestone walk that led to the massive front door.

At that instant a flock of crows burst from the trees around the house, wheeling in circles. Ty stopped his bike and watched them, rising until they were like black specks in the air. Ty looked back at the house.

"What are you staring at?"

The voice startled Ty. He twisted, trying to see who had spoken. There wasn't anyone behind him.

"I'm right here."

Ty whirled back around, almost knocking his bike over. The road ahead of him had been empty

a few seconds before. Now there was an old woman standing there. She was smiling a little, her hands on her hips. She was dressed in a dark blouse and slacks and dull yellow shoes spattered with mud. Her face was wrinkled, but her round eyes sparkled. She laughed. It was a funny, cracked sound, as though something was caught in her throat. She tilted her head. "I asked you a question," she said. "Are you too shy to answer?"

Ty shook his head instantly. Everyone seemed to think he was shy. He wasn't. He wasn't afraid of people at all. He just didn't like to be around them all the time. Most of them were too silly or too noisy. Most people liked to talk all the time, like Shari did.

"Not shy, then," the woman said, her eyes fixed on his. "So answer me. What were you looking at?"

Ty swallowed, unsure what to say. He rolled his bike back a few feet. "I was looking at the house, I guess. I was curious."

The woman looked past him. "It's mine."

Ty waited for her to say more, but she didn't. So he cleared his throat, rolling the bike a few feet farther away from the woman.

She laughed. "What a timid boy. I'm scaring you, aren't I?"

Ty didn't know how to respond, so he just stood still. She laughed again and it made him angry enough to say something. "No. I just . . . my mother needs help moving in."

"Ah," the old woman said immediately. "Have you bought a house in Pleasant Hills?"

Ty nodded cautiously. The woman seemed strange. She was smiling now. "The houses are getting closer and closer. I might just have neighbors one of these days."

Ty watched her scan the horizon, gesturing vaguely towards the woods. "Long ago, there was no one. No one at all out here. Except the Crows, of course," she added, smiling a little again as though what she'd just said was some kind of private joke.

"How long," Ty began, his voice a little raspy because of his nervousness. "How long have you lived here?"

The old woman chuckled. "I was born in that old house. So was my mother. And hers, and hers, and hers."

Ty rolled the bike backward, and she looked at him sharply.

"I really do have to get going," he said, turning the bike sideways.

"You haven't asked my name, young man," the

woman said. "Or given me yours. If we are going to be neighbors, that's the polite thing to do. Introduce yourself."

Ty turned the bike a little farther, eager to get away from this strange, old woman. "I'm Ty," he said, putting one foot on the high pedal and rocking forward to set it. "What's your name?" he asked, almost over his shoulder.

"Mrs. Crow," she said.

Ty had started to push down on the pedal, but he stopped abruptly and turned back to look at her when he heard her laugh. But she was gone.

Ty had spent three days getting his room exactly the way he wanted it. His posters were all put up and perfectly straight. His drawings were hung along one wall and his rock collection was organized. He had helped his mother bring in the last of the boxes and store stuff in the closets and cupboards. He had set up his telescope the night before. The little balcony was great, and he had been right about the lights. He thumped down the stairs and went into the kitchen.

"Tina says it happened," Shari was saying.

Ty watched his mother shake her head. "Things like that always turn out to have some reasonable explanation."

Shari shook her head. "Who can explain a couch being turned upside-down? Tina said they just got up in the morning and it was like that."

Ty sat down to eat a bowl of cereal. By the time he was half-way finished his mother was still trying to convince Shari that living room couches could not simply flip over by themselves in the night. By the time he stood up from the table his mother was getting tired of the subject, he could tell. Ty wanted to ask if he could ride out into the countryside again, but his mother was frowning at Shari.

"I think it's quite a jump to assume the house is haunted. Does Tina tell a lot of stories like this?"

Shari wrinkled her nose. "Ah, Mom . . ."

"Well, does she?"

Shari scraped her chair back. "How would I know? I haven't known her very long. She doesn't seem like the kind of person who makes up wild stories."

Ty watched his mother frown. "You might be a little cautious, Shari."

Shari stood up. "I think she's telling the truth."

Ty's mother poured a little more milk into her glass. "It sounds like someone played a trick on her. Doesn't she have an older brother?"

Shari nodded thoughtfully. "And she says that he's kind of a bully sometimes."

"He probably did it," Ty said, hoping to end the

topic. Both his mother and his sister looked up, annoyed. He shrugged. "Well, he probably did. Just to scare her."

"You don't know that," Shari said stubbornly.

"Of course I don't," Ty agreed. "I do know couches don't roll over in the night." He turned toward his mother. "Can I go riding today?"

His mother nodded. "I don't see why not. Where?"

"The same place," Ty told her. "Down to the dirt road, then east from there."

His mother stood up, holding her plate. "Be careful. I'd like it better if you rode with friends. Then if anything happened—"

"Someone would be there to help me," Ty finished for her. He had heard this lecture about a million times. He knew his mother was right, too. But he hadn't found anyone he wanted to ride with yet. He turned toward the garage.

"Have fun," his mother called and he turned to smile at her. He promised himself he would try to meet a few kids before long. It'd be better if he knew a few people before he had to start school.

Coasting down the driveway, Ty looked across the street at Tina's house. He had seen her throwing the ball for the big dog several times now. She had come over a few times, too, to see

Shari. He hadn't really talked to her, but she didn't seem silly. How could anyone believe in a haunted house? Scientists had proved over and over that kind of stuff was phony.

Ty rode the bike as fast as he could, standing up to put his full weight against the pedals. The morning was soft and warm. It would be hot later, but now it was wonderful. Turning off the pavement, Ty let the bike slow a little. He rode up the hill slowly, looking out over the iron fence to the thick stands of trees beyond the old graveyard. What he really wanted to do was to find a way to get across Mrs. Crow's property to the woods.

Ty stood up to get up some speed and rode toward the old stone house, following the dirt road as it curved around. He didn't want to run into Mrs. Crow again. He shook his head, thinking. He hadn't told his mother anything about her and he wasn't sure why. Maybe, he admitted to himself, he was afraid his mother wouldn't let him ride out here anymore if he had.

It wasn't like Mrs. Crow had done anything scary, Ty argued with himself. Maybe there wasn't anything wrong with her except that she wasn't used to having people around. Maybe Mrs. Crow was just a loner like he was.

A crow suddenly swooped close, so low that Ty felt the wind from its beating wings. Startled, he ducked, his right foot sliding off the pedal. For an instant, Ty thought he was going to be all right, then the bike bounced into a rut. He fell, coming off the bike as the front tire rose, then slammed back down. Ty hit the ground hard, skidding a little on the rough dirt. Pain seared his right elbow and both knees as he hit. The handlebars were suddenly right in front of his face and he closed his eyes as his cheek hit the chrome. A dull pain spread across his face. Then everything was still.

For a few seconds, Ty lay still, breathing hard. Then he slowly sat up and unfastened his bike helmet. He was all right, except for skinned knees, a scraped elbow and a bruise on his cheek. But he was angry. What a stupid wreck. He looked up. He wasn't close to the house yet. Mrs. Crow wouldn't see him.

Ty stood and pulled the bike upright. He was furious with himself. Every day he saw the crows sitting on the fences in Pleasant Hills, or perching in the trees looking down calmly as people passed close to them. Too close. He should be getting used to that by now. So why did he have to crash his bike when one of them flew over his head a little too low?

"You're hurt."

Ty whirled around. Mrs. Crow was standing in the center of the road, her hands on her hips.

"Where were you?" he demanded, too upset to be polite.

Mrs. Crow shook her head, waggling an index finger at him. "Where was I, when? An hour ago? When I was your age? Last Tuesday?"

Ty stared at her. She was wearing dark clothes again, like she had just been to a funeral, and the clunky, dull yellow shoes. Her eyes were intense, and she stared at his face. Uncomfortable, Ty glanced across the fence and looked at the gravestones. The white one was larger than the other two. As he watched, a crow flapped toward it, spreading its wings and tail to land, cawing. Ty looked back at Mrs. Crow. There had to be a path into the bushes close by. Did she just wait around all day for people to come past so she could act weird?

"You aren't usually this clumsy are you?" She smiled at him.

Ty shook his head. "I guess I'll get going now," he said, trying to keep his voice polite. He took a step backward.

Mrs. Crow made an odd sound deep in her throat and Ty stared at her. She was pretty old.

Maybe she did just walk around all day waiting to run into someone to talk to. It was her land, after all. She could do whatever she wanted on it.

"Have you heard any . . . odd . . . stories lately?" Mrs. Crow asked suddenly, her voice low.

Ty felt his eyes widen. He looked down quickly, hoping she hadn't noticed.

"You have?" Mrs. Crow asked quickly. She took a step toward him and Ty took another step back. His knees hurt and he wanted to get started toward home. Mrs. Crow was staring at him, an impatient look on her face.

Ty shook his head. "I don't know what you mean."

Mrs. Crow pointed a bony finger at him. "Liar."

Ty hesitated, remembering what Tina had told Shari. "My sister's friend said her couch was turned upside-down," he finally said, feeling silly. Mrs. Crow listened to the whole stupid story with her head tilted, her dark shiny eyes glued to his.

When he was finished Mrs. Crow laughed. "A couch. Incredible."

Ty bent his arms and the scraped skin burned as he turned the bike around. "I have to go home now."

"There aren't more stories?"

Ty shook his head and started to walk slowly, shoving his bike along.

"Wait," Mrs. Crow said from behind him.

"I'd better start home," Ty said again, walking a little faster.

"Let me help," Mrs. Crow offered.

Ty shook his head, but she was already beside him. Ty stepped away, unsettled by her closeness. Her clothing was made out of some stiff, rustling cloth and she smelled dusty, like old curtains.

"I really don't need help," Ty insisted, leaning forward to push the bike a little faster.

Moving incredibly fast for her age, Mrs. Crow got past him and stood again, her hands on her hips. He stared at her. He didn't know what to say. All he wanted to do was to go home.

"Wait," Mrs. Crow said in a quiet voice. "Home isn't as far away as you think it is. Look." She pointed.

Ty followed her gesture. On the side of the road without the iron fence, there was a tangle of brush and weeds almost as tall as he was. He looked back at her face. "I really do have to go now—"

"*Look,* Ty," Mrs. Crow ordered. He looked again. This time he saw what she was pointing

at. There was a faint path running through the dense undergrowth. He looked back at her.

"Where does it lead?"

"Home. Didn't you hear what I said?" She gestured for him to step onto the path.

Ty shook his head, about to argue. Then Mrs. Crow simply turned and led the way. He followed. But as he did, he stayed a little distance behind her. He didn't really think that a tiny elderly woman could be dangerous, but he wouldn't have believed that she could walk this fast either. He was having trouble keeping up. Her clothes rustled as she moved through the thickets, following the narrow path.

"There," she said after a few minutes. Ty leaned on his bike and stared. The path opened onto the curving paved road that bordered Pleasant Hills.

Mrs. Crow cackled, but softly this time. "Where you turn off the roads look like they go in entirely different directions, but the dirt road angles back until it's almost parallel with the street. The path just connects the two." She turned. Ty nodded. Just then a sudden burst of rasping shrieks made him look up. A flock of glossy black crows was winging through the air above them. When he looked back down, Mrs. Crow was gone. He

thought he caught a glimpse of her dark form through the bushes, but he wasn't sure. He shoved his bike the last few yards up the path and started home. His knees were beginning to ache as he limped along the shoulder of the paved road. Above his head, the crows wheeled in a circle, screaming and cawing.

4

Ty straightened up, stepping back from his telescope. He had managed to find the horse head nebula again tonight. It was so beautiful. Ty yawned. He picked up his telescope and carried it back inside, carefully setting the tripod against the wall. He closed the sliding glass door. Then he went down the hall and started downstairs.

Ty could hear voices in the kitchen. Shari was home. Her voice sounded breathless and low. Maybe she had another ghost story to tell. There seemed to be a new one nearly every day.

"He said there's no way anyone could have gotten in," Shari was saying as Ty came into the kitchen. Her eyes were sparkling. "And it wasn't the couch this time. The bed in the guest bedroom was all rumpled and the pillows were on the floor."

Ty sat down at the table, looking at his sister. "Who told you this?"

"Tina's brother. Jason."

"You said he's a bully," Ty reminded her.

She tipped her head back. "He is mean sometimes. But it doesn't matter what he's like, Ty. The story could still be true."

Astonished, Ty watched his mother nod. She spread her fingers, tapping the table. "I've been hearing stories, too, Ty."

Ty shook his head. "Kids probably are playing tricks. They hear the stories and decide to join in."

"Ty's right," his mother said, instantly looking less worried.

Shari just frowned. "But I talk to everybody, Mom. One lady at the grocery store told me that she put her car in her garage, then, in the morning, it was out at the curb. And," Shari put up her hand before Ty could say anything, "she *never* leaves her car out. *Ever*."

Ty fidgeted. He really didn't want to talk about all this. It was silly. "No one has ever seen a ghost, have they?"

Shari shook her head. "No. Not that I've heard about anyway. But they see plenty of other stuff."

Ty's mother leaned forward. "One man supposedly saw weird looking people walking around."

Shari was nodding enthusiastically. "I heard that from Regis, Tina's friend. She knows someone who knows him. He lives two blocks over."

Ty stood up. "I'm going to go up and read or something before bed." He walked out of the brightly lit kitchen. Behind him his mother and Shari were talking again, comparing what people had said. He was amazed that his mother was falling for it. She was a trained nurse. She was usually so scientific about everything.

Ty hated rumors. The year before at school someone had started a story about one of the math teachers being fired. The teacher was strict and no one liked him very much. So people had wanted to believe it. But it had turned out to be completely false.

"Like upside-down couches and flying cars," Ty muttered to himself as he went up the stairs. He closed his door and pulled off his shoes, bending over at the waist. His knees still had thick scabs. It hurt to ride his bike, but he could walk perfectly well. And the scrapes on his arms were almost healed. Maybe he would go exploring on foot. He could use the little path that Mrs. Crow had shown him as a short cut.

Ty flopped back onto his bed, staring at the ceiling. He didn't really want to run into Mrs.

Crow again, though. Maybe if he went really early in the morning she would still be asleep.

Ty sat up. That was probably a good idea. He started to get up to go ask his mother if he could leave to go exploring at seven in the morning. But as he stood up he heard a soft tapping sound that made him hesitate.

Ty stared at the closed door.

"Shari?"

There was no answer.

Ty shook his head. It would be just like Shari to start playing tricks on him. He knew it made her angry that he didn't want to hear every new story, that he didn't believe that something weird was going on. Ty tiptoed across the room.

He stopped in front of his door, listening to the hollow tapping sound. It didn't sound like someone tapping on wood with a finger. Maybe she was using a little stick, or something like a thimble. He reached out for the doorknob and hesitated for a few more seconds until the tapping started again. Then he jerked the door open and flung it wide, expecting to see Shari's surprised and guilty face.

The hall was empty.

The tapping continued. Ty spun around. The little balcony window was a blank rectangle. The

curtain was pulled back over the sliding glass door. He crossed the room, intending to peer out, then stopped. If someone was out there, they would be able to see him coming across the lighted room. Ty shook his head. He didn't think there was a way for anyone to climb up to his balcony. There were no trees or vines planted near enough; there were no trellises to provide hand holds. It was impossible.

The tapping got louder. Ty turned suddenly and ran across the room, snapping off the light. The balcony window became transparent, the dim moonlight shining in. He couldn't see anyone outside. He walked closer, angling his steps until he was sure he could see the whole width of the little balcony. He exhaled. No one was there.

But the tapping hadn't stopped. Ty held still, barely breathing, trying to figure out where the sound was coming from. Standing in the darkened room, his ears tried to make sense of the tapping while his eyes darted wildly from one wall to another. Could it be a leak? A faucet dripping in the bathroom down the hall? But he knew it wasn't. It was close.

The tapping stopped. Ty stood in the dark, breathing as silently as he could, waiting. He could hear his mother saying something down-

stairs. Then he heard Shari answer. A little chill went through Ty. Whatever this was, Shari had nothing to do with it. He glanced back toward his door, still standing open. The hall was dimly lit from the light over the stairs at the far end. He listened to his mother and sister talking. Maybe he should call them.

Then the tapping started again. Ty felt his stomach tighten. Then he shook his head angrily. He didn't believe in ghosts. There was a perfectly logical explanation for whatever was causing the tapping. He just had to find it, that was all. He forced himself to move across the room again. He looked out the window once more. Then, on an impulse, he opened it wide. The tapping stopped instantly. Ty stood, his heart beating faster. A second sound made him catch his breath. There was an odd rustling, like the sound of wing feathers. A smell of dry dust came into the room on the faint night breeze.

Ty flipped on his room light and carefully slid open his balcony door. Lying close to the rail in the exact spot where he had set up his telescope earlier was a long black feather. As he watched, an invisible current of air spun it in a circle, then lifted it and blew it off the edge of the balcony and into the night.

5

Ty woke up early. Remembering the night before, he sat up quickly, scanning the room. It had taken him until almost two in the morning to fall asleep. The tapping hadn't started again, but every rustle, every tiny creaking of the house had brought him wide awake. All night long he had told himself that someone was feeding the crows and now they thought any window they came to would have food behind it if they tapped at it long enough. That was the only possible explanation.

Ty pushed the covers down and swung his feet to the floor. Today he was going to forget all about jumping couches, crows that flew at night when any normal crow was asleep and strange little old ladies. He was going to go straight past Mrs. Crow's house and go for a hike along the edge of the woods.

Ty got up and dressed. His mother was already in the kitchen, humming as she made tea for herself. Ty ate a bowl of cereal while she bustled around, rearranging cupboards and deciding where to keep the dish towels.

"I have a few more days of my vacation," she was saying, "then I have to start work at Franklin Hospital. Maybe we can go camping the weekend after next, though. Just a short trip."

Ty nodded. His mother had used her vacation days to move. They had saved a lot of money by doing everything themselves. But it had also meant that they hadn't gotten to take their annual camping trip.

"So what are you going to do today?" his mother asked.

Ty looked up. "I wanted to take a hike out by the woods."

His mother nodded. "Talk Shari into going with you."

Ty groaned.

His mother frowned. "Ty, it isn't safe for you to take off alone the way you do. The other day proved it. What if you had hit your head?"

Ty looked down. This was one bad thing about her being a nurse. She saw so many hurt people all day long that she thought he was

going to break his neck every time he fell off his bike.

"Morning." Shari came into the kitchen. She looked sleepy so Ty didn't answer her. His mother only smiled. Shari slouched into one of the chairs and folded her arms on the kitchen table. Ty stared at her. Sometimes she was fun to hang around with—and sometimes she was awful. It depended on whether she was feeling like a teenager that day or not. He stared at her, trying to figure out which kind of day this would be.

"Ty wants to go hike in the woods," his mother announced. "And I don't want him to go alone."

Ty closed his eyes. His mother really wasn't going to give him a choice. If Shari was in a bad mood she was going to blame all of this on him. Then she really would make the day miserable.

"Sure," Shari said, sitting up a little straighter. "I'd like to go hiking."

Ty looked at her and she smiled. He exhaled, glancing at his mother, who beamed at him. He looked at Shari cautiously. Maybe it would be a good day after all.

"Eat a good breakfast then, you two," his mother said.

As they went out the door, Shari pointed across the street. "Maybe Tina would like to go, too."

Ty shook his head. Shari turned everything into a social event. He started to tell her to forget it, but Tina happened to come out of her house. The big golden retriever was right behind her.

"Hi, Tina!" Shari called before Ty could stop her.

Tina looked across the street and waved.

"Want to go hiking?" Shari yelled.

Tina nodded. Her long hair flounced. She turned and ran back to the door, opened it and called inside. After a second, she turned back and yelled across the street. "Where are we going?"

Shari looked at Ty. He frowned. This wasn't going to be the hiking trip he'd had in mind at all.

"Where are we going?" Shari demanded.

Ty shrugged. "I wanted to go out past Mrs. Crow's house and into the woods."

Shari frowned. "Mrs. Who?"

Ty shrugged again, upset with himself. He hadn't meant to say that. "She lives out there," he gestured vaguely.

"Out that way," Shari called back to Tina. "Past someone named Mrs. Crow's house and into the woods."

Tina leaned back into the open door. After a few seconds, she turned and came across the street, the big dog leaping excitedly beside her.

"My mother says not to annoy Mrs. Crow," Tina said as she came closer. "I guess she came to all the council meetings when they were planning this subdivision. Mom said she tried to stop the building." The dog jumped at Shari, licking her face. "Get down, Brandy."

Ty watched Shari push at the dog, laughing. This was going to be a stupid hike. Maybe he should just forget it. Just then, Shari grabbed him by the shoulders and wrestled him around. "My brother," she said to Tina, "is a little shy. But he's okay."

Ty ducked, getting away from her. He could feel his cheeks getting hot and he knew he was blushing. He hated it when Shari teased him in front of other people. He kept his back to them and walked off without looking back. Brandy was instantly behind him, ready to go with whoever was actually going to go for a hike instead of standing around. Behind him, he could hear the two girls start talking. He still didn't look back. He knew Shari wouldn't let him go alone—not after what his mother had said. But that didn't mean he had to pay attention to her.

Ty was almost to the dirt road before the girls caught up. "I'm sorry," Shari mumbled as she came alongside him. He glanced at her. She actually looked sorry.

"Have you seen the old graves?" Tina asked.

Ty turned to look at her. He nodded.

Tina lifted her hair back over her shoulders. "I've never seen Mrs. Crow. Have you?"

"She's not very tall," Ty said slowly, remembering, "and kind of old."

Tina stared at him. "Have you talked to her?"

Ty glanced at Shari and nodded slowly. Shari made a face. "You never told Mom that."

Ty frowned. "There's nothing to tell. I just ran into her out here a couple times, that's all." He walked a little faster. They turned onto the dirt road and headed up the first hill. Once they were near the top, the old iron fence caught Shari's attention.

"It looks like something out of an antique shop . . . or a horror movie."

Tina bent to pick up a stick for Brandy to chase. She threw it straight down the road and Brandy came bounding back to them, the stick poking out one side of his mouth. Tina threw it again.

At the top of the second hill, Tina stopped. "See the old graves?"

Shari shaded her eyes against the morning sun and peered across the field. "Two? No, there's three."

Tina nodded.

Without warning, Brandy started to bark, running along the iron fence. "Brandy, come back," Tina called. The big dog ignored her. He bounded back and forth, leaping at the fence, barking.

"What does he see?" Shari wondered aloud. "Maybe there's something in the graveyard that's scaring him or something." Her voice had that spooky tone Ty was getting so tired of.

"Oh, it's just probably a rabbit or something," Tina scoffed. Ty looked at her, liking her better all the time.

"And your brother is probably the one who turned all your furniture upside-down," Shari said. "Nothing weird is going on at all."

Tina looked at Shari. "He might have done it. Jason loves to play tricks. He likes upsetting my parents lately, too."

Shari shook her head. "How do you explain the car being outside, then? Or the tapping?"

Ty stared at Shari, his stomach tightening. "What tapping?"

"Oh, people say someone taps on their windows at night," Shari said with an exaggerated casualness. "Nothing that would interest you, I'm sure."

"Who said it?" Ty demanded.

Before Shari could answer, Tina cried out. Ty turned to look. Brandy was struggling under the fence, his back low, his paws clawing at the earth. A second later he was inside, running fast. He streaked across the grassy field, his head up, barking loudly. He disappeared into the trees by the graves.

Tina called over and over. They could hear Brandy's barking, muted a little with distance, but sharper and quicker, as though he had found whatever it was he'd been barking at.

"I should go get him," Tina said uneasily. "My mother made a big deal out of saying that we shouldn't bother Mrs. Crow, but I can't just leave him in there."

"Is that Mrs. Crow's house?" Shari asked, pointing at the partly hidden roof line farther up the road.

Tina and Ty both nodded. Shari stared at them for a second, then looked back across the field. "But it's a *graveyard* in there."

Tina stepped around them and stood in front of

the fence. She looked at it for a few seconds, then started climbing. She swung her leg over the top and jumped down, dropping to the earth. "I have to go get him," she said, as though talking to herself. But she didn't move away from the fence.

"I'll go, too," Ty said slowly. Tina was right. She couldn't just leave her dog here. There was nothing to be afraid of. Graves didn't have anything in them but bones. And Mrs. Crow probably wouldn't see them at all.

Ty climbed the fence and jumped down to stand beside Tina. "We'll be right back," he said to Shari. She nodded, but he could see how nervous she was. "Want to come?"

Shari shook her head. "No. I'll wait here."

Ty glanced at Tina. "Let's hurry if we can."

Tina hesitated a second, so Ty started walking, glancing nervously at the house as he went.

Brandy's barking got louder with every step they took. Tina ran close to Ty. Her face was tense, pale, and she kept glancing back at Shari. When they came to the first stand of trees, Ty slowed to a walk, still following Brandy's feverish barking.

"He's over there," Tina said, hesitating. She pointed to the stand of trees which sheltered the graves.

Ty led the way. As they got closer, he saw Brandy, and what Brandy had been barking at. Two of the graves had little vases of flowers set upon them. Near the third, standing almost completely hidden beneath a willow tree, was Mrs. Crow.

"What took you so long?" Mrs. Crow demanded as they got closer. She was staring at Ty. Tina darted forward to grab Brandy's collar. She pulled him back, trying to hush him.

"We weren't sure we should trespass," Ty explained as Tina quieted her dog. The barking sank into low growls. Brandy strained, stiff legged, leaning toward Mrs. Crow. Tina had hooked her hand through his collar.

"The dog seemed to feel like it was a good idea." Mrs. Crow glowered at Brandy and he barked twice, before Tina could make him stop.

For the first time Ty looked at the headstones. They were engraved with women's names, all with the last name of Crow. "Some of my ancestors," Mrs. Crow told them, pointing at the graves with flowers. She cleared her throat,

glancing at the largest white headstone. It seemed like she was about to say something more, but then she hesitated and cleared her throat again. She turned to look at Ty. "Have there been more stories?"

Ty shook his head. "We'd better go now."

Tina's eyes were wide. Brandy kept trying to free himself, pressing hard against his collar.

"We need to get going," Ty insisted. He took Tina's arm, trying to turn her around, but she had to keep pulling Brandy along and he was strong.

"No more upside-down couches?" Mrs. Crow said slyly.

Tina spun around. "Who told you about that?"

Mrs. Crow gestured at Ty.

Tina shot Ty a frown, then looked at Mrs. Crow. "It was probably my brother. There have been a lot of tricks. So other kids are doing it, too."

Ty nodded and tried to get Tina and Brandy moving in the right direction. But Mrs. Crow was walking toward them now. "Does your brother know how much trouble he's causing people?"

Tina pulled at Brandy, her face tense. "He couldn't possibly be doing all of it," Tina said.

"All of what?" Mrs. Crow insisted. She was so close that Brandy was barking again, pulling at

his collar. "Stop," Mrs. Crow said, pointing at the frantic dog. Brandy's barking ended instantly, and he sat down, panting. Mrs. Crow looked at Tina again. "All of what?"

Ty frowned impatiently. This hike was turning out to be as stupid as staying home listening to Shari talk. "A bunch of people have talked themselves into thinking there are ghosts playing tricks on them," he snapped.

"Maybe they are," Mrs. Crow said quietly. She glanced at the graves, then up at the sky. "I think having people so close disturbs them." She gestured vaguely. Her face was stern, an odd expression in her eyes. She looked like a witch in a movie. Then she smiled. "Look at your faces; you both look pale. I'm only joking, of course."

Tina's eyes narrowed. Ty shook his head. He had been right. Mrs. Crow was weird.

"What's taking you two so long?" Shari called through the trees.

Ty turned to face her as she walked toward them. "We're coming now."

Shari appeared, walking fast. "Hi," Shari said to Mrs. Crow, when she got closer, her voice bright and friendly. "I'm Shari Considine, Ty's older sister."

Mrs. Crow nodded. She almost smiled. Ty felt

like screaming. Adults always loved Shari because her manners were good.

"Would you like to see Crow Manor?" Mrs. Crow asked suddenly. She was really smiling now, beaming. She looked like somebody's grandmother. A nice grandmother who spent too much of her time being lonely.

"Your house?" Shari asked brightly. "Sure."

Mrs. Crow nodded. "It is a very old house. There is a lot of history inside its walls."

Ty shook his head and tried to pull Brandy back a few steps. "Thanks," he said to Mrs. Crow, "but we were going to go hiking and . . ."

"I'd rather see her house," Shari said firmly. "We can go hiking any day."

Ty looked at Tina. She hadn't said anything in a long time and her eyes were still wide. What was wrong with her? Brandy sat quietly at her feet. Mrs. Crow laughed lightly.

"Tina doesn't really want to go hiking either, do you dear?"

Tina smiled and shook her head. "I'd love to see your house."

Ty stared at her. She sounded strange. He fought an urge to shout at her, and at his sister. "I really wanted to explore the woods a little," he said instead.

Mrs. Crow smiled. "Well, then. You could just go on, and meet the girls later."

"No," Shari said quickly. "Mom didn't want him to go alone."

Ty swallowed. His throat felt tight. Mrs. Crow was still smiling. "Well, then. Shall we go?" She gestured like a butler in a bad movie, bowing from the waist. Shari giggled. Mrs. Crow started walking and Shari followed. A little behind them, Tina and Brandy walked side by side. Brandy was silent, his ears down. Tina still had the silly blank smile on her face. Ty was last in line, turning to follow only after Tina had refused to meet his eyes when she passed.

Ty walked slowly, trying hard to think of a way to keep from going with Mrs. Crow. Finally he gave up and plodded along, determined that they were only going to stay for a few minutes. Then he would remind Shari that this was his hiking trip and she was only coming along to please their mother.

"See the old weather vane?" Mrs. Crow asked as they got close.

Ty looked at the ridge of the roof where it showed between the ancient trees. The silhouette of a crow with outstretched wings had been cut from metal. It perched on a black iron arrow that swung as the breeze picked up.

"Let's go in the back door," Mrs. Crow said, as if talking to herself.

"What's that for?" Shari asked, pointing. Ty followed her gesture. An enormous black pot hung from a tripod of metal rods braced at an angle in the earth. A crow was sitting on top of the tripod. When they all turned to look, it spread its wings and flapped into the air.

Mrs. Crow paused. "Soap-making cauldron. Over a hundred years old."

Shari grinned. "People used to make their own soap."

Mrs. Crow opened a heavy oak door. "They made their own *everything*."

Tina made a little sound and Ty looked at her. She still looked pale, but her eyes fastened on his and she smiled. He smiled back, nervously.

"Stay here, Brandy," Mrs. Crow said. Brandy sat down instantly, his head raised, his ear lifted as though asking a question. "Good boy," Mrs. Crow said, motioning for Shari to go inside.

Tina looked at Brandy in astonishment. She caught Ty's eyes a second time. "He isn't trained. He's never done that before," she whispered. She pushed her long hair back over her shoulders, blinking like someone who has come from a dark room into bright sunlight.

Ty glanced around the yard. There had to be some way to get out of going inside. But Tina was turning to follow Shari. Reluctantly, Ty went after her, passing Mrs. Crow, who held the door open until they were all in, standing in a dim hallway. The ceiling was incredibly high in the narrow hall, at least fifteen feet above their heads. Ty followed the endless smooth walls with his eyes.

"I think the dining room," Mrs. Crow was saying, talking in a low voice. "Don't you think?"

Ty turned back to glance at her. She raised her head. "Shari, dear. Turn right at the third door on the left."

"All right," Shari said over her shoulder.

Ty walked a little faster. Each door they passed stood half open. Ty could see glittering chandeliers and dark furniture in huge rooms. The house was completely quiet except for their footsteps. Ty tried to imagine what it would be like to live in this house all by himself. He shivered.

"This one?" Shari asked.

"Yes." Mrs. Crow touched Ty's shoulder and he jumped, startled, moving to one side to get away from her touch.

"Go on, go on," Mrs. Crow said, tapping him lightly again.

Ty heard Shari gasp as she went into the room. Tina made a little sound, too. An instant later, as he turned to go through the door, he knew why. The dining room was incredible.

The walls were glossy black, and the light from the chandeliers sparkled like stars reflected in a night sky. There were only small windows, set high in the walls. As his eyes adjusted to the odd lighting, Ty saw an enormous table carved from dark wood, in the center of the room.

"Look," Shari said excitedly. "It has crows in it!"

Mrs. Crow laughed aloud. "It takes some people a long time to notice."

Tina went to stand by Shari, beside the table. Ty followed her, glancing nervously back at Mrs. Crow. This whole place gave him the creeps.

Tina reached out timidly and touched the table. Ty saw the crows. They were carved into the wood, in profile, in a border that went all the way around the huge table. Ty stared at the table. It was enormous. It would never have fit through the doors.

"There isn't another table like this anywhere in the world," Mrs. Crow said. "It was made right here, in this room." Ty glanced at her, then away again.

"Well, we'd better get going now," Ty said when the silence went on for a minute.

Shari exhaled impatiently. "Ty!"

He shook his head. What was wrong with her? Couldn't she tell that something was weird here? He looked at Tina. She was still blinking too fast, but the blankness was gone from her face. She looked nervous.

"Let's go upstairs," Mrs. Crow was saying brightly. "I think you would enjoy seeing the library."

"Ty loves books," Shari said quickly, her voice warm and friendly. "Don't you, Ty?"

He shook his head at her when Mrs. Crow crossed the room. Shari frowned. Ty was glad she hadn't heard Mrs. Crow ask Tina about the ghost stories going around in Pleasant Hills.

"Lead the way, Shari," Mrs. Crow said, bowing like a butler again. She gestured toward a door on the far side of the room. Shari smiled and walked toward it. "Out and to the left, then turn into the fourth door on the right," Mrs. Crow said. Shari smiled back at her and Tina walked along quietly.

Ty tried to stay as close to the girls, and as far away from Mrs. Crow, as he could. "There," Mrs. Crow prompted as Shari came to the fourth door.

Shari turned. Ty followed Tina into a wide, round room with dark paneled walls. The floor was made out of some kind of black stone. A spiral staircase rose straight up from the center of the room. Mrs. Crow made another grand gesture. Ty stared at the floor to avoid meeting her eyes. Little cuts in the stone caught his attention, but he didn't want to bend down to look.

Shari led the way again, up the steep stairs. On the second floor, Mrs. Crow guided them through a series of turns and doorways. "This," she said finally, "is the library."

Ty followed the girls into a room that had bookshelves covering every wall from the floor to the ceiling. There was a big globe on an ornate stand in the center of the floor and a desk with a quill pen in a silver stand. Ty exhaled slowly. This was like being in a museum. He glanced at Mrs. Crow. She looked somber, almost sad. He looked back to the bookshelves. Mrs. Crow was probably really lonely living here all by herself. This house would be spooky at night.

Ty looked at the books. There were hundreds, and they all looked old. Mrs. Crow smiled at him and it made him feel uneasy. He wasn't sure why she made him so nervous, but she did.

"Two mornings ago half these books were on the floor."

Ty turned, startled. Mrs. Crow nodded, her eyes narrowed. Then she laughed. "See, you believe the stories, too."

Shari turned, looking puzzled.

Ty shook his head. "Shari, let's go. Let's go *now*." The air in the huge room seemed stale, and heavy, like a weight. "Thanks for everything," he said to Mrs. Crow. "We really do have to get going."

Tina nodded. "Yes. We do. Brandy will wonder if I have left him forever."

Ty turned for the door. Mrs. Crow frowned, but she led them back down the stairs. This time, Ty lagged behind far enough to bend and look at the stone floor. Each stone had a name carved into it. He read five or six, then hurried to catch up as Mrs. Crow guided them through another confusing set of turns. Shari kept trying to ask Mrs. Crow about the books being on the floor, but Ty interrupted three times with stupid remarks and Shari finally gave up. At last, Mrs. Crow pushed open the massive front doors and led them outside. Tina whistled and after a moment, Brandy came tearing around the corner of the huge house. He leapt up and licked Tina's face. Tina

hugged him. Ty drew in one deep breath after another. Shari just stood, looking annoyed.

"Thank you," Ty said politely. He wanted to get away, as far away from this creepy house as he possibly could. Mrs. Crow said goodbye to Shari and Tina. Then she suddenly leaned close to Ty's ear. "If they tap on your window again, don't open it."

Ty swallowed, blinking, as the old woman went back into her house and closed the door. Shari was standing with her hands on her hips.

"Let's go then. Ty, you are so rude sometimes."

Tina didn't say anything as they started back up the road. Brandy trotted along, quiet, his ears and tail low.

7

Sunday morning was sunny. Ty snuggled down under his covers, wishing he could stay in bed. He had felt strange and nervous ever since they'd gone to Mrs. Crow's house. Before that he'd been able to explain everything to himself; kids were just playing tricks on their parents and each other. It wasn't that hard to imagine how furniture could get moved, or a car could get turned around.

Shari's latest story was about a family a few streets over whose garage door had suddenly gotten stuck. According to Shari, they had tried everything short of blowing it up and it still wouldn't open. Shari seemed to think the garage door was absolute proof that there were ghosts at work in Pleasant Hills.

Ty knew better. Garage doors could be jammed

shut a dozen ways. Everything that had happened could have ten different explanations, all reasonable and having nothing at all to do with ghosts. All but one thing. Nothing could explain how Mrs. Crow could have known about the tapping on his window. Ty started to feel weird just thinking about it. He hadn't told *anyone*.

"Get up, Sleeping Beauty," his mother called from the hallway. Ty sat up, frowning. He was starting to hate Pleasant Hills. He didn't want to go out to the woods anymore because he was afraid he would run into Mrs. Crow. But sitting around the house was boring. Shari was constantly on the phone or out on the lawn, talking to her new friends. And at dinner every evening, she had yet another two or three ghost stories to tell.

"Up and at 'em," his mother said, farther down the hall. Ty could picture her leaning against Shari's door, smiling as she called out to wake each of them up.

Ty swung his feet to the floor. His mother had to go back to work the next day. She had asked them if they would both spend the day with her today. Maybe Shari would be in a good mood. He hoped so.

Ty dressed and went down to the kitchen. As

he passed his sister's door he heard her banging around. She slammed her closet doors shut. Well, Ty thought. Shari certainly sounded like she was in a good mood. It ought to be a wonderful day.

The kitchen was bright and sunny. Ty's mother was standing in front of the stove, but the kitchen was not filled with the sweet scent of French toast. His mother was frying chicken.

"I thought we'd go for a picnic since we had to miss our camping trip this year. At least we can go spend one morning in the woods. Shari said the friendly neighbor used up all your hiking time the other day."

Ty nodded. He had listened to Shari telling his mother about Mrs. Crow. Shari made the house sound like an incredibly interesting museum and Mrs. Crow sound like a wonderful person. He had fidgeted the whole time. He wanted to tell his mother that Mrs. Crow made him nervous, but he wasn't sure how to explain it without sounding as silly as everyone else did about their furniture moving around.

Ty's thoughts went around in a very familiar circle. Maybe Mrs. Crow was the one who fed the crows. There were always dozens of them around her house. So maybe she knew they tapped on windows. That would explain almost everything.

But how could she have known that they had tapped on *his* window?

"Almost ready?" his mother was saying. "Why don't you eat a quick bowl of cereal?" She looked past him, smiling. "Good morning, Shari! It's a picnic day. Look at that sun."

Ty heard Shari mumble an answer as he made himself cereal. His mother kept talking and after a few minutes Shari was actually answering. By the time they were ready to leave the house, she was pretty much awake.

Ty walked along, a little ahead of his mother and sister, carrying a day pack with the food in it. The neighborhood was quiet. Almost no one else was up this early on a summer Sunday. Once they had turned onto the dirt road, his mother began talking about school. "It's less than a mile away," she was saying. "It will be a nice walk in good weather and you can ride the bus the rest of the time. The bus stop is right at the end of Madison Street."

Ty looked across the fields as they got to the top of the first hill.

"So where does this Mrs. Crow live?" his mother asked.

Shari pointed. "Up there. See the old house?"

Ty watched his mother's face. She looked interested, and he started to feel uneasy.

"I don't want to end up there again," he said quickly.

"I don't either," his mother said, smiling. "She sounds very interesting and I would love to see the old house sometime. But today, I want to be outside, under the trees."

Shari was waking up. She started to tell them about someone who had seen several dark figures lurking around outside their house. "And in the morning," Shari said, looking from Ty's face to their mother's, walking almost sideways, "they found their clothes all scattered from the laundry. Some of them were *outside*." Shari paused, still looking back and forth between them.

"I am getting so sick of all this." Ty watched his mother frown. "I want our house to be perfect. I want Pleasant Hills to be a wonderful place to live."

"Me, too," Ty said. He thought about telling his mother about Mrs. Crow. But it would only upset her more. And he wasn't sure there was anything to tell her, really. So one lonely old woman was interested in the stories and managed to guess right about a crow tapping on his window. So what? Ty looked around at the sun soaked fields, the brilliant green grass, and took in a deep breath. It was a beautiful day and he didn't want

to let anything spoil it. Without saying anything to his mother or sister, he began walking a little faster.

As they passed Mrs. Crow's house, Ty kept his eyes on the road. He could hear his mother talking to Shari about the old house as they passed, but he refused to join in, or even to listen.

Once the old house was behind them Ty found himself whistling. This was what he had wanted to do since they had moved in. The woods were beautiful. There were little paths leading into some of the deeper thickets—narrow trails gouged out by sharp cloven hooves.

"Deer tracks," his mother said, pointing.

Shari sighed loudly. "Can we eat pretty soon?"

Ty hitched the pack up a little. Shari was definitely in a whiny teenager mood today. "I wanted to hike a ways into the woods," he said, glancing at his mother.

She nodded. "Not too far, Shari," she said.

Shari frowned, brushing at an imaginary piece of dirt on her shorts.

Ty started off before Shari could say anything else. He followed the deer trail, winding through the trees. It really was a beautiful day.

When they came to a clearing with wild flowers mixed into the grass, Ty stopped.

"There." His mother pointed. "There's even a few flat rocks to sit on."

Ty led the way again, with Shari close behind him. He took off the pack and sat down, handing it to his mother. She unpacked the food and the paper plates.

The raucous cry of a crow startled Ty halfway through his second piece of fried chicken. His mother looked up too. "There are so many crows here."

Ty looked up at the trees. The big black birds were perched in the swaying branches. Every second or two another one cried out, a grating, startling sound.

"I hate them," Shari said.

The instant she said it, a chorus of sharp, rasping cries rose from the treetops. Ty watched as a huge crow spread its wings and dove from its perch, skimming the ground across the clearing. It landed. A second crow followed it, then another.

"They're tame," Ty heard himself say. His pulse had quickened as he watched the crows. "Too tame."

"Remember the one that flew in the kitchen that first day?" Shari asked. She stood up and brushed crumbs out of her lap. "I really am starting to hate them. Everyone does."

A second round of cawing split the still air. Ty's mother stood up. "Are you both finished?" She started bagging up their trash, glancing up at the trees. Ty stood, too. Shari jumped up and waved her arms at the crows on the ground on the other side of the clearing. They did not react.

A fourth crow came out of the trees, landing in little hops in the meadow grass. A fifth followed it, then several more. Ty watched them, his stomach tightening a little as more and more of the big black birds came to the ground. They spread out over the grassy ground, blocking the deer path.

"Let's hike back a different way," Shari said in a small voice.

Ty heard his mother laugh and turned to see her smiling. "Don't let them spook you, Shari. They just want some of our leftovers." She walked toward the crows, her usually fast walk slowed to a stroll. "I refuse to be upset by a bunch of too-tame crows," she said, looking back over her shoulder at Ty. She stopped and bent to smell a clump of lupines.

"Well, I don't like them," Shari insisted, shouldering the day pack.

Ty followed his mother. Shari brought up the

rear. As they got closer, the crows stopped pecking at the grass, stopped preening their feathers, and simply stood still, watching them approach.

"This is creepy," Shari said in a low voice. "Why don't they fly?"

Shari's mother laughed softly. "They will in a minute when we get closer."

Ty walked behind his mother, his heart beating faster. He stared at the dull yellow beaks of the crows. They were huge, and sharp. Their eyes were shiny and dark, impossible to read any expression in. Were they afraid? Or even cautious? Angry?

"Go on, get out of here," Shari cried suddenly from behind him. She ran forward, waving her arms and shouting at the crows. One or two hopped out of her way, but the others stood still, turning to watch her. Then, abruptly, the flock rose, but they didn't fly away.

One after another, the crows wheeled around and plummeted downward, attacking Shari. She screamed, covering her face with her arms, turning in circles. Ty rushed forward with his mother, shouting and hitting at the angry birds, trying to drive them away.

Ty seemed to be standing at the center of a

black wind storm, with sharp beaks cutting at his arms and the back of his neck. Every time he tried to look up, shining black eyes were looking into his own, dull yellow beaks were jabbing his face. He could hear Shari screaming and his mother's astonished cries.

The crows finally rose into the air, shrieking and circling. Ty straightened up and watched them go. His mother's blouse was torn at the shoulder and Shari was touching a spot of blood on her cheek. His arms were scratched and stinging. They all had little cuts all over their faces and necks. Above them, the crows flew back and forth, higher and higher.

"Oh, what a shame."

The voice came out of the bushes. Ty turned, startled, his heart speeding up again. Mrs. Crow stepped into the clearing. "I heard them," she said. She extended a hand to Ty's mother. "Hello. We haven't met, though I know your delightful children. I'm Mrs. Crow."

Shari touched the scratch on her cheek. "That was awful." She shuddered. "Have they ever attacked you?"

Ty's mother fingered her torn blouse and looked at the now empty sky. "I've never had a wild animal do that," she said thoughtfully. "It's not like they were cornered or that we threatened them . . ."

Mrs. Crow smiled at them.

"It was weird," Ty said, staring at Mrs. Crow. She was wearing her usual outfit and it struck Ty suddenly that in her dark clothes and odd dull yellow shoes, she sort of *looked* like a crow. He blinked, trying to shove the thought away, afraid he would laugh out loud and have to make up some explanation. Mrs. Crow was weird, but she wasn't a bird.

"Are strange things still happening in Pleasant Hills?" Mrs. Crow asked brightly.

Shari took a deep breath. Ty stepped forward, desperate to think of some way to keep Shari from getting started.

"This is my mother's last day of vacation," he blurted out. "So we're spending it together."

Mrs. Crow frowned for a second, then smiled again. "How nice."

Ty nodded eagerly, smiling back at her. He sounded like a four-year-old and he didn't care. All he wanted to do was to get away. "We were going to spend the whole day hiking," he

told Mrs. Crow, keeping the forced smile on his lips.

Mrs. Crow's face darkened. "I wouldn't do that. Not here."

Shari looked puzzled. Ty's mother put her arm around her. "Why not?"

Mrs. Crow glanced around. "These woods can be dangerous."

Shari followed Mrs. Crow's gaze. "Dangerous?"

The old woman nodded.

Shari smiled nervously. "What do you mean?"

"I think we'll just start home," Ty's mother said quickly.

Mrs. Crow looked startled. "You are certainly welcome to stop in at my house to wash up and collect yourselves."

"Thank you," Ty's mother said. "You're very kind. But we don't want to put you to any trouble."

"Nonsense," Mrs. Crow said firmly. She gestured to Ty and Shari as she took Ty's mother by the arm and led her up the path. Shari followed without a word, still touching her cheek. Ty fell into line, glancing back at the clearing. He was starting to think that Mrs. Crow, the ghost stories and the vicious crows were somehow related. He was beginning to wish that his mother had

never bought this house, that they had moved anywhere in the world except Pleasant Hills.

Mrs. Crow got Shari talking as they walked. Ty tried interrupting, but this time it didn't work.

"And you remember Tina," Shari said excitedly, turning to Ty to make sure he was listening, then back to Mrs. Crow, who nodded. "Tina's father found a threatening letter in their mailbox. It was in the weirdest envelope."

Ty grimaced, but he didn't say anything. Shari thought everyone was nice, that everyone just wanted to be her friend. Mrs. Crow was nodding thoughtfully, listening attentively.

Finally, they reached the old dark stone house and paused in the drive.

"This is quite a place," Ty's mother said, looking up at the stone walls. "But we can just go on home now."

"Oh no, Mom," Shari interrupted. "You have to see inside. This is the most amazing house."

"I would enjoy the company," Mrs. Crow said.

Ty felt his stomach tighten. Mrs. Crow was gesturing and Shari was already moving toward the door. His mother was just behind her. Feeling almost sick, Ty followed them through the heavy door and shivered as it swung shut behind him.

"My mother would love to see the dining room," Shari was saying in her warmest polite voice. Ty shook his head, knowing no one would even notice. Mrs. Crow started them off down the hall. After two or three turns, Ty knew that he would never be able to find his way out without help. The thought made his stomach tighten.

"Here," Mrs. Crow said. She led the way through a door Ty didn't remember. It was arched, high and narrow. Inside the dining room, the strange carved table gleamed darkly in the dim light. Ty heard his mother catch her breath when she realized what the carvings were. Mrs. Crow explained that her family had lived in the house for generations. She seemed like a perfectly harmless old woman again, a little lonely, but nothing more.

"How odd that your last name is the same as the bird," Ty's mother said. She paused. "I mean there are so many of them around here." She gestured nervously and paused again.

Mrs. Crow's silence lasted just long enough so that Ty's mother began to smile awkwardly. Then the old woman laughed. It was an odd cracked-sounding laugh. "There certainly are," she finally said, her voice vague and far away. "There certainly are a lot of crows, aren't there." Then she

laughed again as though it was the best joke she had heard in years. When she finally stopped, Ty glanced at his mother. She was watching Mrs. Crow.

"I hope I didn't say anything that offended you," she said politely.

Mrs. Crow shook her head. "No, no. It's true. There are far too many."

The instant she finished speaking a loud rasping cry split the air above them and Shari cried out, ducking, covering her face with her hands. Ty flinched, too, and his mother looked wildly around the room.

The crow had been perched somewhere above them. Ty saw an elaborate chandelier hanging from the high ceiling and a small open window near the chandelier. As he stared in the dim light the big black bird circled the room twice, then went out the window.

Shari looked pale. "Do they get in here often?"

Mrs. Crow nodded sadly. "They do. I try to keep them out."

Ty's mother was eyeing the window. "If you could get up there somehow, you could put a screen on that window. That'd stop them."

Mrs. Crow shook her head, smiling. "No. I don't think it would."

Ty's heart was thudding. The crow had startled him, too. He thought about the day they had moved in and the crow that had flown into their new kitchen. No wild animal would act this way.

Ty's mother was complimenting Mrs. Crow on the beautiful table, then explaining that they had to go. A few minutes later, they were back out in the sunlight and Ty drew in a deep breath. His mother and Shari were saying polite goodbyes. He mumbled something and managed to keep himself from running down the road. Mrs. Crow finally said goodbye and they began to walk away. Ty glanced back and she smiled. Ty shivered and looked back up the road.

"I think," his mother said, "that Mrs. Crow is very lonely. But there's something a little strange about her, too."

Shari kicked at a pebble. "I think she's really interesting."

"I do too," Ty's mother said. "But I think it'd be best if you didn't come out here alone."

Shari made a face. "I won't. Don't worry. I never want to run into a bunch of those crows again."

"Ty?"

Ty looked at his mother. She hesitated, then spoke. "I don't want you hiking out here either.

I'm not sure what's going on around here . . . but the crows and—"

"I won't," Ty said quietly. He was clenching and unclenching his fists. He was sick of feeling uneasy and nervous. It was beginning to make him angry.

Ty woke to the sound of tapping. For a few seconds, he thought it was part of his dream. Then he sat up in bed, staring at the little window that looked out onto his balcony. There was no moonlight. So it was close to dawn.

Ty lay still, listening. The tapping got louder, more insistent. Ty didn't move. It was a crow, he told himself. A big black crow with a brain as big as a walnut. It wasn't very smart, but someone had stood inside an open window and fed it, so now it pecked at windows, hoping for handouts.

"But why would it be pecking at it in the dark?" Ty wondered in a whisper.

Outside his window the tapping stopped and Ty heard an odd sound, like dry paper rustling. Mrs. Crow had told him not to open the window. But what would happen if he did? Maybe he

should just open the sliding door. Would the crows come into his house like they did hers? Maybe that was all there was to it. Maybe the crows, once you let them in, became real pests like they were at Mrs. Crow's house. Ty shook his head. What a big scary mystery—about as scary as tame squirrels at a campground. And all the other stories were probably exactly what he had thought all along. Kids were playing tricks on each other and on their parents.

The tapping started up again and Ty clenched his teeth. What was he supposed to do? Just lie here and wait for the sun to come up? And then what? Stay inside until he was old because of a bunch of stupid birds?

Ty sat up. He counted to ten, then swung his feet to the floor. Again, he paused. Then he took a deep breath and crossed his room quickly. He pushed his face close to the glass, ready to fling the window up and shout. If there was a crow out there, he was going to teach it that this particular window was a bad place to tap.

What Ty saw made his heart lurch, then beat so hard that it almost hurt. He spun away, staggering back from the window. There were four or five people standing on his balcony, looking into his window. They came closer. A tall thin woman

stared in at him, slowly raising one long-nailed hand, clawing in slow motion at the glass. For a few seconds, she stood there, then Ty heard murmurs, like the others were talking in low voices.

Had he locked the sliding door? He was pretty sure he had. Ty blinked, glancing frantically toward the hall. He had to warn his mother, to get her and Shari out of the house. Maybe they should run to Tina's. But he could not move.

As Ty stood, frozen by his fear, a small man pushed the tall woman to one side and pressed his face close to the glass. Ty blinked again. In the dim light he saw a murky flurry of motion, then the balcony was empty. The people were gone.

Ty went back to the window and stood looking out, his heart still hammering at his ribs. Somewhere, outside in the darkness, a crow shrieked.

After a long time, Ty checked the lock on the sliding door, then made his way back across his room and got into bed. Three times he sat up, then lay back down. What would he tell his mother or Shari? That he'd had a bad dream? That people who had been standing on his balcony had disappeared right in front of him?

Eyes staring into the darkness, alert to every

sound, every breath of wind outside, Ty lay still until he finally went to sleep. It took a long time.

When Ty got up, his mother had already left for work. Shari was still asleep. Ty spent a long time walking around the house, looking out the windows, thinking. What he had seen the night before had to have been a trick of his imagination. Or maybe he had only dreamed that he'd gone to the window. He didn't know how else to explain it. He wasn't about to believe in people who could disappear.

Ty wandered into the kitchen. There was a note lying on the counter. His mother always left them notes when she went to work.

I will be home right on time. Call Tina's mother if you need anything and don't go anywhere off the block until I get back. I hope you both have a fun day. I'll call at lunch.

Ty looked at the clock. It was almost eight now. His mother's lunch hour was at ten in the morning because her shift started at six. She worked the early schedule so that she could be home in the afternoons. During school, she usually got home before they did.

Ty looked out the kitchen window. It was a perfect summer morning. The sun was out and the lawns looked cool and green. Pleasant Hills looked like the perfect place to wake up on a summer morning. But it wasn't.

Ty ate cereal, then went to the top of the stairs and listened. Shari wasn't awake yet. There was only silence coming from her room. She might sleep until noon, he knew, without their mother there to wake her up. He went back down into the kitchen.

Ty walked from one room to another, trying to think of something to do. He walked to the kitchen window and looked outside. Tina was standing on her lawn holding a tennis ball in her hand. Brandy was bounding back and forth. Ty watched her for a few minutes, then, without allowing himself to think too much about what he was doing, he went out the door.

"Hi, Ty," Tina called.

Ty waved at her. He stuck his hands in his pockets and crossed the street. Tina looked surprised.

"Where's Shari?"

Ty shrugged. "Still asleep. I was wondering . . ." He trailed off, uncertain.

Tina threw the ball for Brandy. As the big dog

bounded off she turned to face Ty. "What happened that day?"

Ty hesitated. "What day?"

Tina frowned. "You know what I mean. What happened? I barely remember it." Brandy came loping back and dropped his ball at Tina's feet. Ty waited while she threw it again. When she turned to look at him her face was troubled, tense.

"That day at Mrs. Crow's something weird happened to me. And to him." She gestured at Brandy. "I know you think it's all tricks, but I don't. Not anymore. I think something really strange is going on here."

Ty nodded. Admitting it made him feel sick, but he couldn't fool himself much longer. "I don't know what Mrs. Crow did to you, but for awhile your face looked different." He searched for the right words. "You looked like you were walking in your sleep or something."

Tina nodded. "That's how I felt. Not the whole time, but when we first went in. And Brandy has never acted like that in his life," she went on, stooping to pick up the tennis ball and throw it across the grass. "It was like she put a spell on us or something." Tina shivered. "I know that sounds stupid."

Brandy bounded back across the grass. He dropped the ball at Ty's feet this time. Tina smiled. "That means he likes you."

Ty patted the big dog's head. He threw the ball hard. It went across the next yard and rolled down a hill out of sight. Brandy leapt to chase it, barking happily.

Tina faced Ty. "My brother is saying that your family is doing all this. It all started right after you moved in."

Ty was so surprised he stood perfectly still, staring at her for so long that she repeated what she had said. "I heard you," he managed. "Why?" he added after a few more seconds. *"Why?"*

Tina sighed. "Because a few people were beginning to say that he had something to do with all of it. He's a bully. No one really likes him." She picked up the tennis ball Brandy returned and put it in her pocket. Brandy jumped in a tight circle around them, looking for his ball. Tina pretended not to notice him. He kept sniffing the ground where he had dropped the ball, but finally he gave up and wandered onto the lawn. "My brother is hard to get along with," Tina added quietly, without looking at Ty.

"I've never even met him," Ty said.

"I know," Tina answered. "He knows Shari."

"Everyone does," Ty said, smiling a little.

"Do you think," Tina asked suddenly, "that Mrs. Crow is a witch or something?"

Ty shook his head automatically, then shrugged. "Something is sure strange about her. That whole house is creepy."

Tina shivered. "And the crows. Shari told me how they attacked all of you."

"I saw something weird last night," Ty heard himself say. He hadn't meant to tell Tina about the dream of watching the people dissolve, but he found himself doing just that. "And I heard a crow," he told her. Then he added, "I've never had a dream like that in my life." He looked at her. She was just listening; she wasn't looking at him like he was nuts. "Shari said someone else saw weird looking people around. So maybe it wasn't a dream," he finished, watching her face.

Tina was still looking at him. "Maybe not."

Ty shook his head. "I didn't think anyone would believe me. I wasn't sure that *I* believed it had happened. I'm still not."

Tina was still staring at him. "It's all so strange. I hate it."

Ty looked across the street. He should go back and see if Shari was awake. It would make her mad if she woke up and he was gone without

leaving a note. She always acted like she thought she was his mother or something. Brandy came bounding up the slope. He jumped up and put his paws in the center of Ty's chest.

"He really does like you," Tina said. "Here." She fished Brandy's tennis ball out of her pocket and handed it to Ty.

Ty took the ball and looked both ways across the street. There were no cars at all; there almost never were. The road connected the subdivision streets but it didn't really lead anywhere. No one went into town this way; they went back out the main entrance.

Ty threw the ball as hard as he could, straight across the road. Brandy raced after it, disappearing into the thick bushes on the other side.

"You throw a lot farther than I do," Tina said, shading her eyes to watch Brandy. "He'll never want to play with me again." Then she looked at Ty again. "I have never believed in ghost stories in my life."

Ty nodded. "Me either."

"Shari sure does."

He shrugged. "She likes to talk to people about anything."

"I like her," Tina said quickly.

Ty nodded again. "Everyone does."

Tina suddenly looked across the road. "Where's Brandy?"

Ty turned to scan the brushy field. "I don't see him."

Tina started walking, calling Brandy. Ty looked back toward his house, then started after her. If Shari woke up and he wasn't there, she'd be mad. But he'd be back in a few minutes, and chances were she wouldn't wake up this early.

"He's probably still looking for the ball," Tina said once they had crossed. She peered into the brush. "He hates to give up and come back without it. Brandy?" she called loudly, then stood still to listen.

There was no sound at all. Then, Ty thought he heard a dog bark, but it was far off and he couldn't tell which direction it was coming from.

Tina glanced at him, then started walking again. Ty followed for a ways, then touched her shoulder. "There's a path farther up that cuts over to Mrs. Crow's dirt road."

Tina nodded when he pointed. "Lead the way then. I think I hear Brandy." Her face was tense and anxious.

Ty set out, walking so fast that he was almost running. If he got lucky, Shari would sleep and he wouldn't have to explain where he had been.

Besides, the faster they got Brandy, the less chance they had of running into Mrs. Crow.

When they got to the dirt road, they both stopped, listening again. Ty frowned, looking up the hill. The barking was closer now, but he was pretty sure it was coming from Mrs. Crow's graveyard. He looked at the iron fence. It was forbidding, with its row of dark metal arrows running across the top. Ty looked back at Tina.

"I have to go get him," Tina said unhappily. She fidgeted. "I mean, I can't just leave him out here. He could get hit by a car trying to come home or—"

"I'll go with you," Ty interrupted her, hearing the uncertainty in his own voice. He glanced back toward Pleasant Hills. This was his fault. He was the one who had thrown the ball far enough for Brandy to start chasing rabbits or whatever had distracted him from his game of fetch. But he didn't want to go over the fence. For a minute they stood side-by-side, looking at it. "Let's go," Ty finally said. Tina took a deep breath and nodded.

They helped each other over the iron fence and walked fast toward the sound of Brandy barking. It sounded like he was near the graves again. "What if she's here?" Tina asked without turning to look at him.

Ty felt his heart speed up. He had been trying to ignore the possibility. "We get Brandy and leave fast," he told Tina. She nodded at him when he caught her eye, but she looked nervous.

"She did something to me that last time. I know you don't believe me, but . . ."

"I believe you," Ty said. He meant it. "And I am not playing any of the tricks in Pleasant Hills," he said quietly as he skirted some tall grass, then fell in beside Tina again. "No matter what your brother says."

Tina nodded. "Maybe it's Mrs. Crow?"

Ty shrugged, looking straight ahead. They were getting close to the trees that shielded the graves. He swallowed, his mouth suddenly very dry. "I think she has something to do with all of it," Ty said carefully. "But I'm not sure what. I'm going to try to find out," he finished, wondering if he really meant it.

"My father found another note last night," Tina said in a small voice. "In an odd old envelope. It said someone was going to get hurt. It didn't say who, or what was going to happen . . ."

Ty slowed his step. "Where did he find it?"

Tina glanced at him. "Under his pillow. The window was open and the screen had been cut."

Ty walked in silence, unsure what to say.

Tina broke the strained silence. "Oh, no." Ty looked up, past the trees. What he saw made him stumble. He blinked, a sheen of sweat breaking out on his forehead. He thought about turning to run, but he couldn't seem to do anything but walk forward. He looked at Tina. She was walking, exactly as she had been. But her face had an odd blank look.

The ten or so people standing around the graves were all looking at Brandy. Ty grabbed at Tina's arm as she started toward her dog. She glanced back at him, her odd, blank expression unchanged. She stopped and straightened up to stand beside him.

"Well, hello," Mrs. Crow said to them both. The people standing around her did not speak, but they were staring. Ty stared back at them, feeling his breath quicken along with his heartbeat. He felt a sheen of cold sweat break out across his forehead. He recognized some of these people. They had been standing on his balcony the night before. Ty's throat tightened and he listened to the buzzing of his own thoughts.

Who were they? All their faces were tense and

angry. All of their eyes were filled with a cold, distant hatred.

The tall woman with a hawkish nose and long dark hair was humming to herself. A small thin man was sitting on the white gravestone, swinging his legs like an angry child in a high chair. His face was twisted with an ugly expression. Ty took in a deep breath. His legs felt weak.

"Ty, how are you?" Mrs. Crow asked suddenly. Several of the people turned to glare at her. Ty glanced at Tina. The strange blank look was still on her face. Brandy was still barking. Mrs. Crow pointed at him. "Lie down and hush."

Brandy yelped as his legs folded beneath him. Then he was just lying there like any well-trained dog, silent, panting. Ty saw a little life come back into Tina's eyes at the sound of Brandy's yelp. She frowned and walked closer, turning to place herself between Mrs. Crow and the big dog. "Leave him alone."

"I haven't hurt him," Mrs. Crow said, "but I will have to if you don't keep him away. He wakes them all up." Mrs. Crow gestured at the people standing in a loose semi-circle behind her. "And they are already so very hungry."

Ty looked at the people again, even though it made his heart pound even faster. They were all

dressed in dark, odd-looking clothes, their faces strangely the same. He looked from the tall dark haired woman on the right to a heavy set man on the left, searching each face. None of them met his eyes. None of them said a word. Ty counted them quickly. There were twelve. Three men and nine women. Ty wanted to demand to know who they were and why they thought they could walk around in Pleasant Hills peeking in people's windows. But he was too afraid to say anything. His fear felt like a stone in his throat, too heavy for his voice to push past.

They aren't really people, Ty heard himself think. He didn't know how he knew it, but he was as sure of it as he had ever been of anything in his life. They looked like people. But they weren't. Something was missing in their faces, in their eyes. Something important.

"We just came to get the dog," Ty said as clearly as he could. His voice cracked and his throat felt dry. He took a step toward Brandy, trying to get Tina to look at him. "We'll just go home now."

"Oh, no," Mrs. Crow said quietly. "I think it's way too late for that."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Ty stammered, as he took another step.

Mrs. Crow gestured at the people again. "The dog woke them up again. Usually they fly all day."

Ty stared at her. "What are you talking about?" he demanded. He started the sentence loudly, but then he lowered his voice. Mrs. Crow was obviously crazy. She didn't make sense at all. And these people who weren't people . . . nothing made sense. Ty stood very still. He could feel his own heartbeat pounding in his temples. He just had to get out of here. He had to get back to Pleasant Hills. Once he and Tina were safe, he could think about what to do about Mrs. Crow, about who he should tell.

Tina was backing up, pulling Brandy with her. "I just want to go home," she said in a strained voice. "We didn't mean to upset anyone. We're sorry."

A strange growling sound rose from the people standing behind Mrs. Crow. They began to move toward Ty and Tina, slowly, gliding across the ground as though their feet weren't quite touching it.

"Run!" Ty screamed.

Tina whirled and ran, Brandy leaping along at her heels. A second later, Ty was right behind them. He ran without looking back, catching up with Tina, sprinting beside her.

"Head straight for the fence," he shouted and she turned to give him a quick nod, then veered a little to the left. They pounded along side-by-side, with Brandy ahead of them now, barking excitedly.

They burst free of the trees and Ty risked a look behind, toward the graves. He couldn't see anyone at all now. "They aren't following us," he panted. As they ran across the wide field, Ty could hear Tina's breathing, as ragged and harsh as his own. "Don't slow down," he shouted at her. Tina didn't answer, but she ran a little faster.

Ty looked ahead of them. Brandy was already at the fence, running back and forth. He was probably looking for the hole he had gotten in through. Ty glanced back once more. Still no one. As they neared the fence he tried to come up with a final burst of speed.

"We have to get Brandy out, too," Tina pleaded as they stumbled to a stop beside the fence. She called the big dog, her voice shaking and rough, broken by the deep breaths she dragged in one after another. Still breathing hard himself, Ty glanced back across the field.

He managed to keep from crying out when he saw them. They were still back at the edge of the

trees, but he could see the people coming toward them. He began to search frantically for a place Brandy could get through. They could try to lift him, but Ty was pretty sure they couldn't manage it. Brandy was big, and he was bound to squirm. Finally, glancing nervously back and forth between the fence and the people, he found the spot.

"Here," Ty yelled. "Tina, here's the place he dug under."

Tina instantly ran toward him, calling her dog. Ty turned to help Tina climb the fence. When she was halfway up, he glanced back across the field. The people had disappeared again. He felt an instant of relief, then his stomach lurched as Tina screamed. He followed her shaky gesture and looked the other direction.

The people were standing in front of them now. Mrs. Crow was not with them, and their faces had become even angrier, dark and threatening. Tina froze, perched awkwardly on the iron fence. The people moved toward them, their odd gliding walk bringing them closer quickly, too quickly. After a second, Tina made a little sound of defeat and fear and dropped to the ground back inside the fence.

Brandy whimpered when the tall sharp-faced

woman pointed at him. He tucked his tail between his legs.

"Just don't move." Mrs. Crow's voice came across the field. Ty turned to see her walking toward them. She was walking fast, almost running. "Stay inside the fence. Don't move," she yelled again.

"Come on," Ty said suddenly, grabbing Tina's hand. He pulled her into a run along the fence line. Brandy sprang after them, barking wildly again.

Ty ran hard, letting go of Tina's hand when they hit rougher ground so they wouldn't pull each other off balance.

"Keep going, don't fall," he shouted at her. She nodded, her face pale and her eyes wide. She glanced back. "Just run," he screamed and she turned back, stumbling and nearly falling. Finally, she caught herself and kept going.

Ty followed the iron fence down a hill, then back up. They had to find a way out. Brandy was running along ahead of them, not barking anymore, his tail low. Halfway down the second little hill. Ty turned back and realized that for a minute or two at least, they were hidden. Mrs. Crow and the weird people could no longer see them. He shouted at Tina, grabbing at her shoul-

der. "Now. Let's get over . . . the fence *now*." His words were spaced around his heaving breath. Tina nodded and came to a staggering stop, calling Brandy back. The big dog came obediently, his eyes darting back and forth.

Again, Ty searched the fence line for a place to get Brandy through. He spotted a place where the bottom iron rail had a little space beneath it and dropped to his knees, digging frantically with his hands. "Get over," he told Tina, "and call him."

Tina nodded, understanding instantly. She clambered over the fence, then squatted just opposite Ty.

"Brandy. Come on, boy. Come on." She patted the ground with her hands, pleading with the big dog. He came closer and snuffled the dirt. Tentatively, he scraped at it with his paws. Tina praised him and he dug a little more. Then Ty climbed over the fence and they both encouraged Brandy, digging at the hard dirt with their hands.

Ty kept glancing up the hill as Brandy dug, dirt flying out behind him. "Come on, come on," he began to chant in a whisper, digging at the hard dirt with aching fingers. Finally, Brandy had opened a good sized hole and lowered himself

to the ground, wriggling forward. Ty jumped back and Tina stood up.

"Good boy, Brandy," she said, glancing back up the hill. Ty looked at her and saw her eyes widen. Her face, flushed from running, went pale again. She looked at Ty, then past him down the road. He knew before he turned around what he was going to see.

Mrs. Crow was coming toward them, still inside the fence. The dark clothed people weren't. They were fanned out across the road.

"Stay where you are," Mrs. Crow called, walking fast. "They are getting stronger."

Ty glanced again at the eerie, menacing people waiting for him and Tina in the road, then back at Mrs. Crow. "Who are they?" he yelled. "Why are they chasing us?

Tina called Brandy as he freed himself from the shallow trench they had dug together. The big dog whined anxiously and stood close to her, staring up into her face. As Mrs. Crow came closer, his whining changed to a growl, the hair on his back rising.

Mrs. Crow was breathing hard and for a few seconds, she just stood, her hand pressed against

her heart, looking at them. Ty kept glancing toward the road. Every muscle in his body was tense with fear. It was all he could do to make himself stand still. He glanced at Mrs. Crow again. She was an old woman. They had almost gotten away.

Mrs. Crow shook her head at him. "Of course you can outrun me. But you can't outrun *them*."

"Who are they?" Ty demanded again.

Mrs. Crow laughed her cracked, unhappy laugh. "Crows. My ancestors who refuse to die."

Ty shook his head. "Ghosts?"

Mrs. Crow nodded and Tina bent to hug Brandy, a soft, frightened sound coming from her lips.

"There's no such thing as a ghost," Ty said automatically, glancing from Mrs. Crow's wrinkled face to the people in the road. Their faces were hard, angry. As he looked at them they moved a little closer. Ty saw the small man who had been sitting on the gravestone lick his lips. The man's stare was like a cat's, watching a cornered mouse. Ty shuddered and looked away.

Mrs. Crow laughed. "Tell *them* there's no such thing as a ghost."

Ty looked at the people again. They seemed more solid, somehow, than they had before. The tall thin woman was looking directly at him now.

"They love your fear," Mrs. Crow told him. "They live on it. Before anyone lived close, they only had mine and they were weak. Now they are getting strong."

"I saw them on my balcony," Ty whispered. Tina's eyes flickered from the ghosts, to his face, then back.

Mrs. Crow smiled. "I told you not to open the window. If you do they come in and they will never leave. They can't exist as people without someone being afraid of them. That's why I fought against the houses being built. I knew this would happen."

"As people?" Ty echoed, thinking about what she had said. Suddenly it all began to make sense. "Are they crows the rest of the time?"

Mrs. Crow nodded. "One of the Crow ancestors was a magician, a great sorcerer. He cast the spell that holds us all." She looked sad, tired. "We can choose to live forever as crows, or, if there is enough fear to feed us, we get stronger and become visible people again."

Ty swallowed, his throat tight and aching. "And the stronger they get, the scarier they are," he said slowly, looking at her through the fence.

"It's a dangerous circle. But there have just never been this many people around. More and

more of them are like this now." Mrs. Crow gestured at the people in the road.

"How many . . ." Ty began.

"How many are there?" Mrs. Crow finished for him. He nodded. "Do you remember the room with the stairway? Their names are in the floor stones. And you've seen them flying."

Ty blinked. "Then there are hundreds?"

Mrs. Crow made a helpless gesture.

Just then the tall thin woman took a few steps forward, still staring intently at Ty. Her fingernails were long and jagged and she raised one hand, then raked it downward as she had standing outside his window. Ty flinched, his knees shaking. The woman tossed her long dark hair and turned to smile at the others. They murmured and shifted, stretching and talking so quietly that Ty couldn't hear anything but a vague hum of voices.

"You mean . . . all the crows?" Tina asked, her voice soft and unsteady.

Ty tried to imagine what it would be like when all the crows had turned into weird, dull-eyed people like this.

"They will do a lot worse things than turn furniture upside down," Mrs. Crow said slowly. "They love fear and they can follow it like Brandy

follows a scent." She gestured at the big dog. He growled and she laughed. "They even like Brandy being afraid of them," Mrs. Crow said quietly. She shook her head. "They got into my study the other night. I found writing paper and envelopes missing."

Tina glanced at Ty. "The notes my father found." He nodded.

Mrs. Crow was arching her brows in question. "They wrote a note saying they hated us and wanted to hurt us," Tina told her.

Mrs. Crow nodded sadly. "They might hurt someone. They want you to be scared of them."

"We just want to go home," Ty said, facing Mrs. Crow. She stood silently. Ty kept looking at her, even though she didn't answer him. His breathing had evened out a little, but his hands were sweaty and shaking.

Mrs. Crow shook her head. "They will never let you go. Not now. Why would they? You feed them."

Tina made a sad and frightened sound. Brandy whimpered, staring up at her. She reached to touch his head, patting him automatically, but her eyes were full of terror and she was staring at the tall thin woman.

"We just want to go home," Ty repeated. His

voice was shaking and he glanced around desperately. Mrs. Crow was simply standing there, watching him.

"Help us," Ty said, turning to face her.

"How?" She shrugged. "I can't even help myself. I can't live anywhere but Crow Manor, I can't go anywhere, I can't have a family or friends. I am the Keeper. So was my mother, and her mother, and her mother before her."

"Are they buried in the graves?" Tina whispered.

Mrs. Crow nodded.

Ty frowned. "I thought you said that you didn't die."

Mrs. Crow gestured toward the graves. "We can choose to. Three Keepers in a row have so chosen. I'll be the last. I have no daughter to take over for me."

Brandy barked once, then sat down again, panting, his eyes troubled and afraid, the white rims showing as he whimpered softly.

"What will happen to them then?" Ty asked, glancing at the people in the road. They were talking a little louder now. He shivered, looking at them. Their faces were blank, their eyes dull.

Mrs. Crow shrugged. "I don't know. I no longer care."

Ty looked at her sharply. "Will they just scare people until they're strong enough to hurt someone?"

Mrs. Crow chuckled. "Oh, they are strong enough for that now. I have no idea what would happen if they could feed on unlimited fear."

Ty felt sick. "But you have to stop them."

Mrs. Crow laughed sadly. "I can't. I know a little magic. Not much. I can make a dog behave. I can make Tina forget a few moments. I can't stop *them*."

Ty glanced around to find Tina gesturing. The Crow people were moving torward them. Tina silently mouthed a single word: "Run." An instant later she was sprinting along the road headed toward Pleasant Hills. Ty hesitated. Then he was pounding along behind her. He glanced back once and couldn't see anyone. But he knew now that didn't mean a thing. Still, what choice did they have? Ty ran as fast as he could. Brandy, no longer barking, ran alongside them, this time staying close to Tina.

"Hurry," Ty screamed. His eyes flicked from the Crow people behind them to the road ahead. Heavy footed and gasping for breath, they finally slowed when they topped the first hill, not because they wanted to, but because they couldn't run any farther.

Walking as fast as he could, Ty kept glancing behind them. Tina kept pace with him, breathing too hard to talk. When they reached the place where the path cut through the brush, Tina turned off.

They tried to run again, but had to slow to a jog to keep from stumbling. The path wound through the thick undergrowth, leading them closer and closer to Pleasant Hills and safety. Or was it safe?

"If they can scare a lot of people all at once," Ty said, catching Tina's eyes, "then what? How strong would they be if a hundred people were running, screaming?"

Tina's eyes widened and she reached to touch Brandy. The big dog was still staying close to her side. Tina shook her head, frowning. "I don't know." She shivered. "That tall lady would hurt someone. I know she would."

Ty nodded. "I think so, too. And the others, once there's enough fear to wake them up, too." He shook his head, feeling almost dizzy; it seemed so hopeless. "We have to think of something."

Tina shook her head miserably. "There's nothing we can do."

Ty was thinking about his mother and Shari

as they rounded the last bend in the path, looking up the road toward Pleasant Hills. Then he glanced the other way. A second later, he wasn't thinking about anything. He was standing still, fighting the urge to run back down the path, to scream.

12

The Crow people were standing in a loose knot by the side of the road. Their skin was a little less pale, their eyes slightly more alive. Mrs. Crow wasn't with them. Ty stared at the people, wishing desperately that someone would drive by. But of course no one would. Almost no one used this road—because it didn't go anywhere. Helpless, Ty turned toward them and stood beside Tina.

The tall woman was staring intently, without blinking. Tina made a tiny sound of fear and turned her head, her long hair falling like a curtain over her face. Ty looked around, his eyes scanning the brush for a stick big enough to work as a weapon.

The tall woman raised her hand, walking forward. Her eyes were nearly black, Ty realized.

She made a little humming sound in her throat as she came forward. Ty felt his legs begin to tremble. He was too tired, too scared. He couldn't even run.

"Hey! Where have you been?"

Shari's voice was so close that it made Ty jump. He turned around to see her striding around the curve in the street, walking toward them, frowning. "Mom is supposed to call in about ten minutes. You get to explain to her why we aren't there to pick up the phone. You know this will worry her sick." Shari looked past Ty for the first time and he saw her frown fade into a look of curiosity.

"Hello," she said politely to the little group of people. "My name is Shari Considine. My brother will never introduce me so I guess I have to do it myself." She smiled her sunny smile.

The tall woman took a step backward.

Shari laughed. It was the laugh she saved for adults, phony, polite, not too loud. Ty shook his head at her, frantically trying to think of a way to explain so that Shari would understand what was going on before she got too close. But she was acting the way she always did with strangers. She was smiling, her eyes sparkling with friendliness and interest. "Do you live around here?" she asked as she stopped, even with Ty.

The tall thin woman was staring at Shari, a look of obvious distaste on her face. She bared her teeth.

Shari thought it was a smile and smiled back. "We've just moved here, but we like it a lot so far. Do you live out this way? Near Mrs. Crow?"

Ty was tugging at Shari's arm, gesturing back up the road. He had to get her away from the people without scaring her too much—that'd only make them stronger.

"Ty!" Shari shook him off and walked forward, her hand outstretched. Shari loved to shake hands with people. The tall woman stumbled backward into the others, her face a mask of surprise. Shari shot a glance at Ty. "What's going on here?"

Ty had been staring, astonished. Now, he stepped forward and tried to speak in a normal voice. "Nothing. These are neighbors, Shari. They do live out near Mrs. Crow. She's a friend of theirs." He smiled. It felt like someone else was wearing his face, but he made it stick, widening it into a grin. "We have just been talking about how lonely some people are living out here," he added, gesturing urgently at Tina.

"We just want to be friendly," Tina said. Her voice was shaky, but she managed to step forward, smiling a wide, forced smile.

Ty nodded at her, grateful that she understood what he was trying to do.

Shari glanced at Ty as the people turned, one by one, and began walking away. They moved quickly, turning off the road here and there, breaking up, straggling apart. They disappeared into the brush. A few seconds later a flock of crows burst out of the thickets. They soared skyward and flew off, heading for Crow Manor.

They got back just in time for Ty to answer their mother's phone call. Ty told her everything was fine and that something good had happened—that he'd explain everything when she got home.

Then Ty spent the next two hours telling Shari everything that had happened. "And then you stumbled on the right thing to do," he finished. They were sitting in their bright sunny kitchen. Tina was perched on the edge of the counter, her long hair spilling forward over her shoulders.

"Shari, you scared them away," she said admiringly. "Even after everything Mrs. Crow said, it didn't occur to Ty or me to try being *not* scared."

Ty leaned forward. "So what we have to do now is explain to everyone in Pleasant Hills what to do about the Crow problem."

Tina nodded. "From now on, everyone should

stop yelling at the crows and ducking when they fly close. We should put out corn, probably, and greet them with big smiles."

Ty looked at her. "Do you think everyone will do it?"

"Sure," Shari interrupted. "Everyone knows something weird is going on and no one knows what to do. They'll be grateful the answer is this simple." She smiled broadly. "No one will accuse us of playing the tricks anymore, Ty. You two are going to be heros."

"Us?" Tina laughed. "*You* are, Shari."

They all started laughing. Ty felt good for the first time in weeks. The sun was bright and summer wasn't over yet. Maybe in a few days he and Tina and Shari would go visit Mrs. Crow with the good news.

Ready for another hair-raising experience? Then check out the following brief selection from *Killer Computer*, the new Avon Camelot Spinetingler coming in August 1996.

April was the first one to notice the computer monitor.

"Hey, look! What's going on? This is weird!"

Jenny and Mark turned to stare at the screen. A message was shimmering there:

ARE YOU BORED? ME TOO!
MY NAME IS ZIPPY!
LET'S HAVE SOME FUN!
JUST TYPE "WOW!" AND PRESS "ENTER."

The letters were electric blue against a bright red background, except for "WOW!" in gold script, blinking on and off.

"What *is* that?" asked Jenny.

Mark shrugged. "I never saw anything like it. Must be some kind of game, or . . . I don't know."

"Type 'Wow!' and 'Enter,' huh? Should we?" asked April.

She looked at Jenny. Jenny looked at Mark. They all looked at the glaring, blinking screen.

"It's your choice, Jen," Mark said.

Jenny couldn't make up her mind.

"Mark, you think it's a good idea?"

Mark frowned and twisted his cap around so that the brim pointed over his right ear. "I duno. Why not?"

"Well, make up your mind, someone!" April squinched up her eyes. "Those blinking letters are giving me a headache."

"Go ahead," Mark urged. "What's the big deal? It's only some computer game."

Jenny looked at the gold letters that went

WOW!
WOW!
WOW!

WOW!
WOW!

"Okay," she said, and tapped the keys.

Nothing happened for a second, and then came whirring and humming sounds from inside the computer. The red, blue, and gold display vanished, leaving the screen dark. Then, the screen went red again, and in huge letters of gold appeared a single word:

HI!

"*Hi!*" exclaimed a computerized voice at the same instant, almost making Jenny jump. She'd forgotten that this computer had speakers. The voice was funny—buzzy and high-pitched, a good voice for a TV cartoon character, she thought.

"Hi!" it said again. "My name is Zippy! What's yours?"

As the voice spoke, the words appeared on the screen.

"Awesome!" whispered Mark.

"Um . . . Jenny . . . uh, that is, Sunflower," Jenny said.

Mark nudged her. "Type it with the keyboard."

"Oh, right." Jenny typed "Sunflower," and pressed "Enter."

A sort of cartoon face—two eyes, a button nose, and a wide, smiling mouth, all in blue, appeared on the screen.

"That's Zippy?" April smiled. "He's cute!"

"Hi, Sunflower!" said Zippy's buzzy voice. "It's nice to meet you! Do you want to play a game? Take your choice!"

The face disappeared, replaced by a list of names.

Jenny stared at the list. "What *is* this stuff?"

"Must be the games you can play," said Mark, bending down to look. "Hmmm . . . 'Revenge of the Zorks,' 'Zlynt Patrol,' 'Catch That Foon!' . . . I never heard of these. What's a Foon?"

April jabbed a finger at the menu. "Hey, there's checkers! At least it's something we know. Let's play that."

"Checkers?" Mark made a face. "That's boring!"

"April's right," Jenny pointed out. "It's the only game here we've ever heard of. Let's try it, and try one of the others later."

"Go ahead, and we'll help you," said April.

Jenny clicked the mouse over checkers, and the menu faded from the monitor, to be replaced by

the familiar-looking board of sixty-four squares, with checkers at either end.

"You go first, Sunflower," said the computer voice. "Use your mouse to move your pieces."

Jenny moved the mouse so the piece she wanted to move was highlighted, but Mark tapped her arm. "You're going to move *that* one? Bad idea! Move *this* one," he advised, pointing.

"What's the difference?" asked Jenny.

"It makes plenty of difference," he insisted. "Okay, it's your game, but don't say I didn't warn you."

"Don't worry, I won't." Jenny moved her piece.

An instant later, a piece moved on Zippy's side of the board. "Your move, Sunflower," said Zippy.

"Wow, he's *fast!*" whispered April.

"'Course he's fast," Mark replied. "He's a computer. But we can beat him. It's like the tortoise and the hare."

"Your glasses are sliding down your nose," April replied.

The game went on, Jenny consulting and taking time for each move, and Zippy's piece moving in a fraction of a split second.

"Something's weird, here," Jenny muttered after Zippy made another move. "I don't know *what,* exactly . . ."

"Weird?" echoed Mark. "What do you—"

"*Hey!* Whoa!" April stared at the screen, her finger jabbing toward one of Zippy's men. "That shouldn't be there! I think Zippy moved *two* pieces in the same turn!"

"You're kidding, right?" Jenny looked for a grin on April's face, but realized her friend was serious. She tried to remember what the board had looked like before Zippy's move, but couldn't. "I . . . I don't know. Are you positive? Mark, what do you think?"

Mark looked at the monitor, and shrugged. "I can't remember how it looked before." His forehead wrinkled in puzzlement. "But it doesn't make sense for Zippy to move two pieces at once . . . it's a computer game! They don't *do* things like that!"

"Let's try to remember from now on," Jenny suggested.

"I have a better idea," Mark said. "Let's make a chart! Where's a paper and pencil?"

Jenny got them from her desk drawer, and gave them to Mark, who sketched a board and drew in the pieces as they appeared on the screen. "Now," he said, "when we move, I'll change my sketch, and then we'll see how it looks after Zippy's turn."

"Good idea," April said. "Let's see . . . he's

already got a king, and we'd better get one, too, pretty soon. How about jumping that guy right there?"

"Unh-unh," Jenny said. "Then he'll double-jump us, unless we move a piece over *there* to block him."

The others agreed, and Mark noted the move on his chart as Jenny entered it on the computer.

Instantly, Zippy jumped all of their remaining pieces. "I win!" said the buzzy little voice. "This is fun!"

The three friends stared at the monitor. "Wait a minute, I don't think he could've done that," Jenny said, "unless . . ."

"Unless he moved *this* piece *and* the king at the same time," yelled Mark, looking from the screen to his sketch and back. "Which is exactly what he did! See?"

He showed the others his drawing. There was no doubt about it. He'd moved two pieces at the same time.

"Wow!" April whispered. "Mark's right!"

Jenny nodded her head, finding the whole thing almost impossible to believe.

But it was true.

Zippy was *cheating*.

IF YOU DARE TO BE SCARED... READ SPINETINGLERS!

by M.T. COFFIN

(#1) THE SUBSTITUTE CREATURE
77829-7/$3.50 US/$4.50 Can

(#2) BILLY BAKER'S DOG WON'T STAY BURIED
77742-8/$3.50 US/$4.50 Can

(#3) MY TEACHER'S A BUG
77785-1/$3.50 US/$4.50 Can

(#4) WHERE HAVE ALL THE PARENTS GONE?
78117-4/$3.50 US/$4.50 Can

(#5) CHECK IT OUT—AND DIE!
78116-6/$3.50 US/$4.50 Can

(#6) SIMON SAYS, "CROAK!"
78232-4/$3.50 US/$4.50 Can

(#7) SNOW DAY
78157-3/$3.50 US/$4.50 Can

(#8) DON'T GO TO THE PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE
78313-4/$3.50 US/$4.99 Can

(#9) STEP ON A CRACK
78432-7/$3.50 US/$4.99 Can

Buy these books at your local bookstore or use this coupon for ordering:

.....

Mail to: Avon Books, Dept BP, Box 767, Rte 2, Dresden, TN 38225 E
Please send me the book(s) I have checked above.
❑ My check or money order—no cash or CODs please—for $_____is enclosed (please add $1.50 per order to cover postage and handling—Canadian residents add 7% GST).
❑ Charge my VISA/MC Acct#_____Exp Date_____
Minimum credit card order is two books or $7.50 (please add postage and handling charge of $1.50 per order—Canadian residents add 7% GST). For faster service, call 1-800-762-0779. Residents of Tennessee, please call 1-800-633-1607. Prices and numbers are subject to change without notice. Please allow six to eight weeks for delivery.

Name_____
Address_____
City_____State/Zip_____
Telephone No._____ MTC 0196

THESE FREAKS ARE FRIENDLY . . . SO JOIN THEM FOR SOME FUN

Read all the scary adventures
featuring Winston and Brock by

DON WHITTINGTON

WEREWOLF TONIGHT	77513-1/$3.50 US/$4.50 Can
VAMPIRE MOM	77936-6/$3.50 US/$4.50 Can
SPOOK HOUSE	77937-4/$3.50 US/$4.50 Can
ZOMBIE QUEEN	78411-4/$3.50 US/$4.99 Can
FREAK SHOW	78412-2/$3.50 US/$4.50 Can

Coming Soon

GHOST SHIP	78612-5/$3.50 US/$4.50 Can

Buy these books at your local bookstore or use this coupon for ordering:

Mail to: Avon Books, Dept BP, Box 767, Rte 2, Dresden, TN 38225 E
Please send me the book(s) I have checked above.
❑ My check or money order—no cash or CODs please—for $_____is enclosed (please add $1.50 per order to cover postage and handling—Canadian residents add 7% GST).
❑ Charge my VISA/MC Acct#_____Exp Date_____
Minimum credit card order is two books or $7.50 (please add postage and handling charge of $1.50 per order—Canadian residents add 7% GST). For faster service, call 1-800-762-0779. Residents of Tennessee, please call 1-800-633-1607. Prices and numbers are subject to change without notice. Please allow six to eight weeks for delivery.

Name_____
Address_____
City_____State/Zip_____
Telephone No._____ DW 0796

MEET THE CROWS WHO REFUSE TO DIE...

Ty wishes he'd never gone out to the graveyard. He just wanted to help find a friend's lost dog. But old Mrs. Crow—the caretaker—says the dog woke the Crow ancestors and now they're angry and very, very hungry. "They feed on fear," Mrs. Crow says. "The more you fear them, the stronger they get." Now the Crow family is getting ready for a feast, and a terrified Ty is running for his life...

IF YOU DARE TO BE SCARED...READ

SPINETINGLERS!

by M.T. COFFIN

#1 The Substitute Creature
#2 Billy Baker's Dog Won't Stay Buried
#3 My Teacher's A Bug
#4 Where Have All The Parents Gone?
#5 Check It Out—And Die!
#6 Simon Says, "Croak!"
#7 Snow Day
#8 Don't Go To The Principal's
#9 Step On A Crack
#10 The Dead Kid Did It

AVON CAMELOT
PUBLISHED BY AVON BOOKS
008-012
RL 4.9

ISBN 0-380-78366-5
UPC 0 71001 00350 5 78366>

UL-455-498
U.S.$3.50
CAN.$4.50